Quiet Offence

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Sennaya Square

The room was not really a room but a space surrendered by the building in an act of fatigue, as if even stone had given up pretending. Tucked into the third floor of a crumbling house near Sennaya Square, it was no larger than a coat closet in the apartments of those who lived with mirrors and servants. Its ceiling sloped low, water-stained from the roof's endless dripping; its walls were gray, damp, and warped like paper that had once been wet. The window—small, warped in the middle, and veined with frost—let in a muted kind of daylight, more suggestion than illumination. And the air, if it could still be called that, never moved. It thickened, it settled, it gathered in the corners like old breath no longer welcome anywhere else.

Afanasy Krutitsyn had lived in this cubicle for three years. He no longer thought of it as temporary. The mattress on the floor, stuffed long ago with horsehair that had since thinned and bunched into odd angles, was his bed. The stool beside it, once painted blue, served as his table, his chair, his coat rack, and sometimes, in the longer nights, his confessor. His boots sat under it, cracked at the heel and lined with straw. On the wall hung his coat—brown, fraying, stiff with old rain—its sleeves dangling like empty arms resigned to their fate.

The corridor outside his door was darker still, lit by a single gas lamp that hissed and coughed when the wind leaned through the cracks. The kitchen was shared by seven others. The washing room smelled of vinegar and boiled cabbage. Pipes moaned behind the walls like distant old men talking in their sleep. Mice ran along the wainscoting without fear. Afanasy sometimes watched them and wondered if they envied him or pitied him. He never envied them. He would not allow himself that.

It was early morning, though time here had no edge to mark it. There was always a sameness to the light and the cold. Afanasy sat on the stool, hunched forward in his long shirt, elbows on knees, staring at the floor where dust gathered into soft shapes. Somewhere below, a man was arguing with a woman in a voice hoarse with drink. Someone else was coughing — the kind of wet, echoing cough that seemed to crawl out from the lungs like a creature. But in his room, all was still. It always was. The air carried no warmth, no scent, only the smell of old plaster and whatever lived behind the walls.

He ran a hand through his hair. It was too long, but haircuts cost coin, and coin had to go to paper, ink, and the occasional piece of black bread. Hygiene was a vanity for those with time and mirrors. He had no time, though nothing spectacular filled his hours. The irony did not escape him. It pleased him, even — to live in contradiction. It gave him the illusion of depth.

Outside the window, the city had begun its gray movements. Hooves struck the stones below. A vendor shouted about apples that no longer smelled like apples. Afanasy did not rush to dress. He never rushed. He believed that haste was the mark of those who feared being seen as idle, and Afanasy had nothing to prove to anyone. Let them walk fast. Let them wear good

coats. Let them arrive at destinations that promised nothing but lamps and noise. He would move only when he must.

He reached for his coat and pulled it over his shirt. The lining scratched his skin. The right sleeve had a tear that widened with every movement, but still he wore it proudly. It showed wear, and to Afanasy, wear was honesty. He would not patch it. Let the nobles walk past with their polished gloves and imported buttons — their coats were lies. His was truth. His was suffering. His was, he told himself, soul.

He laced his boots with fingers that ached from cold and ink. He did it slowly, staring ahead at the wall as though tying his laces was not a chore, but a statement. Then he stood, the room creaking beneath him, and walked to the door. He did not look back. There was nothing to see, and if there had been, it would only remind him that he had nothing worth looking at. He stepped into the corridor where the gaslight trembled in the draft like a flame about to be shamed into extinction.

His day had begun. Or rather, the next portion of the same long day had resumed. Afanasy breathed in, and the corridor gave him air that smelled of rough soap, mildew, and old potatoes. It was not fresh. But it was air.

The walls of the corridor were a yellow-gray, once plastered smooth but now cracked like dried skin, shedding flakes onto the floor where no broom ever lingered long. The paint peeled in long curls near the corners, revealing layers beneath like scars left by time and tenants both. Stains climbed upward in strange shapes — spills, smears, handprints from children who no longer lived here and perhaps never had. A narrow rug ran the length of the hallway, its pattern long worn to obscurity, a threadbare path walked by the desperate and the dull. A single gas lamp mounted near the stairwell hissed unevenly, casting shadows that lengthened.

The air here did not move. It collected. It sat low and close to the walls, dense with the mingled scents of laundry soap, old wood, and something sharper — vinegar, cabbage, kerosene, the faint musk of unwashed bodies. Someone had boiled cabbage again, and the odor had risen like a fog, heavy and wet, filling every corner of the corridor. Afanasy paused halfway down the hall and breathed through his mouth. The stench reminded him of the kind of poverty that explained itself before you even opened your mouth — poverty that announced itself before your boots touched the street. It clung to clothing, to hair, to the tongue. It was not the smell of food, but of submission. No one boiled cabbage with joy.

He moved toward the kitchen, his boots making no sound on the thin rug. The door stood slightly ajar, and from within came the dull clatter of metal — spoons scraping bowls, the rhythmic thump of a knife against wood, someone clearing their throat with tired effort. A single window, half-fogged and sullen with grime, let in a stripe of gray light over the chipped table and iron stove. A kettle hissed faintly, and steam rose from a pot on the back burner, bringing with it more of the heavy stink that had become the house’s signature.

Three others were already inside: a woman with a red shawl and swollen fingers tending the pot, a young man with hollow cheeks gnawing on a crust of bread, and old Pavel Denisov from the room near the stairwell, seated stiffly with his coat still on, sipping tea that looked like it had already been used once before. None of them looked up when Afanasy entered. That was the rule here. No greetings, no small talk, no acknowledgment beyond the movement of limbs within shared space. Eye contact was a kind of trespass, and Afanasy had long since learned how to avoid it without seeming afraid.

He stepped to the counter without a word, reaching for a chipped cup, and poured himself some of the lukewarm water left in the tin jug. His movements were slow, quiet. He did not want to be noticed. Not because he feared it, but because he despised it. Being seen here meant being known as one of them — as a man who lived in cabbage stench and watched windows for hints of sun. And Afanasy, in his secret theater of thought, was not one of them. He told himself this every morning as he swallowed tasteless water and endured the press of other bodies he would never touch.

He held the cup for a moment without drinking. The woman with the red shawl stirred the pot again and muttered something under her breath. The young man sighed through his nose. Pavel blinked twice and coughed into his sleeve. It was not silence. It was life reduced to its quietest motions — movements without conversation, breathing without purpose. Afanasy turned from the kitchen and stepped back into the hallway, cup still in hand. He would drink alone in his room. The air there might be dead, but at least it did not breathe cabbage.

As he walked back, he kept his eyes low, watching his boots move one in front of the other. The floor beneath the rug was uneven, warped from old leaks. He knew every soft spot by memory now — where the board shifted, where the nails stuck up. His life had become a choreography of avoidance. He passed a door that was slightly ajar and heard a baby crying from within. He passed another and smelled something burnt. The hallway swallowed him again, the gaslight sputtered once, and the walls, cracked and curling, seemed to lean closer around him.

Back in his room, Afanasy moved without thought, the way a clock ticks or a flame flickers — not because it chooses to, but because there is nothing else for it. His coat hung stiff by the door, damp at the hem from the snow days before. He touched it briefly, as if uncertain whether it belonged to him or some forgotten version of himself, then pulled it down and let it slide over his shoulders like an old skin. The lining scratched against his wrists, the fabric cold and waxy. He muttered under his breath, “A dead man’s coat fits better than this.”

He reached for his trousers, folded once and draped across the stool — thin, patched at the knees, the seat shiny with wear. He dressed in pieces, like someone assembling a disguise. His shirt, once white, now wore the shade of dishwater. It smelled faintly of the soap they kept in the kitchen cupboard, sharp and metallic. He sniffed the cuff once and grimaced. “Nothing like cleanliness to remind one he’s still poor,” he thought. “The rich wear perfume and call it elegance. I wear lye and call it decency.”

The mirror had cracked the year before — a small pocket one someone had discarded. He had used it once to check for ink stains on his collar, but when the fracture split across his cheek in the reflection, he threw it into the drawer. Since then, he relied on instinct, memory, and contempt. He combed his hair by touch, slicked it with spit, then paused to examine the ink on his fingers. Blue-black beneath the nails, dry and dark around the cuticles.

“Proof of labor,” he said aloud. “Or proof of servitude. Depending on who’s looking.”

He sat on the edge of the mattress to lace his boots. The leather cracked audibly. His toes had learned long ago how to curl around holes. The laces had been replaced with a length of waxed string pulled from a discarded parcel. He tied the knots without pride. There was no pride left in surviving.

At the door, he reached for his satchel — soft with age, the kind of brown that once wanted to be dignified but had since given up. Inside, a cloth-wrapped inkpot, a broken pencil he still kept for no clear reason, and yesterday’s copied transport approvals: permissions for the moving of sugar, of timber, of letters wrapped in importance but heavy with nothing. Orders dictated by men who spoke in half-sentences while sipping tea. And he, nodding, always nodding, pen in hand, eyes low.

“‘Write this, Afanasy. Write that. Make it sound proper. Make it sound French.’” He mocked them in a quiet voice. “‘And don’t forget to copy it five times.’” He gave a faint snort. “If I disappeared, they’d only notice because no one else can spell the Minister’s last name without error.”

He stood for a moment in silence. The room offered nothing — not warmth, not farewell, not promise. Just dust, and the knowledge that it would be exactly the same when he returned. The candle stub on the table had frozen to the wood. The air had already begun to reclaim the faint heat of his breath. He wrapped his scarf around his neck twice and tightened it till it scratched.

Before he opened the door, he looked back once, though he wasn’t sure why. The room gave him no answer. Only the cracked ceiling stared down, quietly judging.

He muttered, “At least you don’t laugh at me.”

The corridor greeted him with cabbage and cold. The light from the gas lamp shimmered weakly down the length of peeling plaster. His boots moved across the rug with soft, dragging sounds. Downstairs waited the street. Beyond that, the Ministry. A desk. Papers. Names that didn’t matter. Orders that didn’t matter. His hand moving, letter by letter, in silence.

He descended the stairs like a man sinking.

Afanasy gripped the railing as he descended the stairs, the wood slick with cold, his boots creaking against the worn boards.

“They don’t even know this staircase exists,” he thought, pausing to let the faint draft pass. “If they had to touch these walls — feel this damp — they’d faint like little girls at a sermon.”

He adjusted the strap of his satchel and moved down another step, the sound of the city beginning to murmur beyond the door below.

“I’ve seen their hands,” he thought, jaw tightening. “Soft as cream, pink at the knuckles, smelling of lavender or orange peel, as if even their skin were perfumed for the comfort of others.” He sniffed bitterly. “I’d like to see one of them tear a piece of black bread with fingers that fragile.”

He stepped onto the second floor landing and muttered aloud, “They hand me a paper as if they’re passing down a blessing. Eyes straight ahead. Not a glance. Not a word. I could be a ghost.”

He remembered yesterday — standing in that warm parlor, fire flickering behind glass, carpets swallowing the sound of his steps — while Baron V— dictated a letter about sleigh routes and dinner arrangements in the same breath. Afanasy had stood there, pencil ready, every muscle still.

“They laugh,” he thought. “God, how they laugh. Big, generous laughter that fills the room like smoke. And not one of them knows what they’re laughing at.” He narrowed his eyes. “And still — still — it echoes in my skull after I’ve gone. That’s the insult. Not the joke. The echo.”

He reached the ground floor, where the tiles were cracked and cold beneath his feet. He stopped near the door and adjusted his collar.

“They have no right,” he said under his breath, “no right to that joy. They’ve never wept from hunger. Never torn pages from a book just to have something to burn.”

He opened the door a crack. Snow swept in like a breath too sharp to hold.

“I carry their words like a mule,” he thought, teeth clenched. “Letters about horses and dances and inheritances. I scratch their names in ink while my own name sits in dust.” He exhaled through his nose. “But I know what they are. I see it. They’re nothing but coats stuffed with laughter. If they were stripped of money and mirrors, there’d be nothing left. No weight, no soul.”

He stepped outside, the wind cutting across his cheek, and whispered, “They’ll never see me. But I see them. That’s the difference.”

Afanasy stood at the threshold, the door half-open, letting the morning cold breathe against his face. The snow had fallen in the night, not heavily but steadily, covering the street in a thin, even sheet that quieted every sound. The sky above was colorless, a dull expanse of ash and smoke. Across the way, the baker’s shutters were still closed, and a woman with a

crooked back shoveled snow from her stoop, her scarf wound tight, her breath visible in thick, white clouds.

“They live like beetles,” Afanasy thought, watching her struggle. “Bent, silent, always scraping, always clearing paths that will vanish again tomorrow.”

He stepped out, pulling the door shut behind him, the latch catching with a dry click. The air was sharp. It pinched at his cheeks, caught in the gaps of his scarf, slid down his sleeves like a thief. His boots left dark impressions in the snow. He moved slowly, as he always did, not from fatigue but with intention — a quiet defiance of the city’s urgency.

“They rush,” he thought. “The whole city runs like it’s afraid. Afraid to be still. Afraid that silence will ask them questions they can’t answer.”

He passed a man with a whip over his shoulder and a cart filled with sacks. The man didn’t look up. No one ever did.

“I am invisible to them,” Afanasy said under his breath. “And that is my strength. Let them ignore me — better to go unnoticed than to be mistaken for one of them.”

He walked with his hands deep in his coat pockets, his satchel bumping against his hip.

“They think I am nothing,” he thought. “A clerk, a speck. But I carry something they’ll never understand. I endure. I see. I feel everything they’ve been trained to forget. I know cold. I know silence. I know the weight of a single kopeck.”

The snow crunched under his feet, the sound muffled, like footsteps in a dream.

“Let them drink and flirt and sign their letters with ink imported from Paris,” he whispered. “I write their lies, but I live the truth. I may be ragged, but I am the only honest man in the room.”

A carriage passed, its wheels hissing through the snow-slush, a coat of arms on the door, brass glinting in the pale light. Afanasy turned his head slightly, just enough to catch the blur of faces inside — powdered, pink, expressionless.

“They think they’re alive,” he thought. “But they’re not. They’re practiced gestures, well-fed puppets.”

He stepped off the curb, his boots sinking slightly, and walked on without looking back.

“I am the true man,” he said quietly, almost kindly, as if consoling himself. “I am the soul they forgot exists. I am everything they fear — poor, silent, alone — and yet still walking.”

And with that, he disappeared into the morning, his figure fading into the soft white hush of St. Petersburg, one more shadow among the snow.

Paper and Perfume

The office smelled of dried ink, wool, and expensive fatigue. A furnace clanked somewhere behind the wall, exhaling a weak breath of heat that never reached Afanasy's corner. The light from the tall windows slanted in pale and distant, landing on stacks of papers that no one read twice. Above, the chandelier collected dust — a dull web of crystals meant to impress men who had stopped looking up years ago. Afanasy sat at his desk, back stiff, pencil poised, as the voice of Baron Gromov floated through the air like perfumed smoke.

"Yes, you may write: 'His Excellency Baron Gromov has the honor of inviting Your Grace and esteemed spouse to a modest gathering…'" the Baron began, his tone flat, the words falling out as if they had been spoken a thousand times before. "No — no — write 'select gathering,' not 'modest.' Modest sounds… Protestant."

Afanasy didn't look up. His pencil moved steadily across the page, the nib whispering on the paper.

"'…on the sixteenth of this month, in the evening, naturally. Supper and music will be provided.'" The Baron sighed. "Put something elegant before that. Write, 'An evening of cultivated company, to be followed by supper and music.'"

Afanasy nodded once and scratched out the line with two neat strokes. His eyes remained on the page.

Baron Gromov stood behind him near the window, draped in a velvet house coat trimmed in gold thread, one slippered foot tapping soundlessly on the rug. His fingernails were immaculate. He held a handkerchief laced with cologne, which he pressed to his face every few moments, not to sneeze but to exist more fragrantly. His breath smelled faintly of wine and sugared almonds. He dictated with the precision of a man who had never written anything for himself.

Afanasy thought, "They don't write because they cannot. They don't need to. Their words are carried for them like their coats."

He could feel the Baron's indifference drifting down like dust — not cruel, but complete. Afanasy was not a man to him, only a function: a thin back, ink-stained fingers, a name he never quite remembered. The Baron hadn't once asked if he had eaten today, if his coat was warm enough, or if he could even afford a candle for the evenings. But he would, without hesitation, ask him to adjust the phrasing of 'gathering' five times before settling.

"Do include something about dancing," the Baron added, already turning toward the decanter on the sideboard. "You know how they are — they won't come without that word somewhere near the end. 'Dancing and light refreshments will follow.' Write it like that. Light refreshments. It's a lie, of course. We'll have caviar and champagne. But it's poor form to mention anything real."

Afanasy pressed the pencil harder into the paper.

“Nothing real,” he thought. “Yes, that’s the rule here. Everything must be folded in lace. Even lies wear gloves.”

He looked at the page — elegant, obedient, hollow. Each letter curved precisely, like soldiers parading in formation. He wondered, not for the first time, how many of these invitations would go unread, tossed aside by noblewomen who never remembered the names attached. Still, they would come. They always did. They came to be seen, to smell each other’s perfumes, to pretend that proximity was affection and repetition was society.

He finished the sentence and held the page steady for a moment, waiting for more.

Behind him, the Baron poured himself a drink and muttered something about weather, or perhaps horses. Afanasy did not listen.

“Write it,” he thought. “Write their pleasures. Copy their laughter. Record their vanities with the ink I can barely afford. I’m the hand that writes their fictions, and I vanish behind the page.”

The pencil dipped again. The words resumed. The invitation continued.

Afanasy nodded, pencil already in motion, though the words made him want to grind the tip into the paper until it snapped.

“‘An evening of cultivated company…’” he thought, lips tightening as he wrote. “Cultivated like orchids in a hothouse — overwatered, sweet-smelling, and utterly useless.”

The Baron paced a short circle behind him, his slippers making no sound on the carpet. A soft clink of glass as he sipped again, then a brief sniffle, dainty, like a man trying not to disturb his own silence.

“‘Light refreshments will follow,’” Afanasy wrote, watching the sentence form beneath his hand with something close to contempt. “Yes. Bread baked by servants, caviar chilled in porcelain, and champagne opened with a practiced flick. All so light, one could forget the starving man coughing outside their gates.”

He dipped the pencil again into the inkwell, turning it with precision, not for perfection’s sake but because it gave his fingers something to do while his thoughts boiled.

“The Baron couldn’t write a letter of his own if his inheritance depended on it,” he thought. “Too many vowels, too much effort. He’d rather dictate to the air and trust that someone beneath him will turn it into sense.”

Afanasy glanced once at the edge of the paper, adjusted the margin by habit, then nodded again as the Baron murmured something about floral arrangements and the necessity of including Countess Rabayeva — “though not too close to the musicians this time; her voice makes the glass tremble.”

He nodded again, though inside his skull the words were snarling.

“Yes, yes, let’s keep the Countess far from the violin. Wouldn’t want her laughter to interfere with the shallow elegance of the night.”

The Baron paused, watching the snow outside.

“Oh, and do include a line thanking them in advance for the pleasure of their presence,” he said without turning. “Something warm. Gracious. You know.”

Afanasy’s pencil paused in the air just a moment longer than necessary. Then, obediently, it moved again.

“Yes, of course, something gracious,” he thought. “Let me bend a little deeper while I write it. Let my spine curl just so.”

His posture remained perfect. His expression, neutral. The Baron would never know that each word was written with clenched teeth.

“They think humility is found in phrases, not in lives,” Afanasy thought. “They say ‘with gratitude’ and mean ‘you may serve me now.’ They say ‘with honor’ and mean ‘remember your place.’”

He finished the final line and placed the page on the blotting cloth, hands steady, as always.

“Yes, Baron,” he said aloud. “As you wish.”

The Baron gave a vague hum of approval and moved again toward the armchair, content.

Behind him, Afanasy blinked slowly, once, then turned to prepare the second copy — a true servant’s salute to vanity, sealed with ink and silence.

The door to the inner corridor opened with a rustle of silk and a faint gust of perfume, one of those sickly-sweet fragrances that seemed to cling to high ceilings and velvet curtains longer than the person who wore it. Afanasy didn’t look up at once — he didn’t need to. He knew that voice, that laugh, the soft jingle of bracelets moving carelessly on a wrist. Baron Gromov’s daughter had arrived, wrapped in fur and finery, trailed by the sound of her own delight.

“She's always laughing,” Afanasy thought, pencil still in hand, though he no longer remembered what he was writing. “She could enter a funeral and find something to giggle at. Laughter without weather — it never changes.”

He finally glanced up. She moved into the room like sunlight through stained glass, refracted, polished, distant. Her coat was white fox, lined with red silk, the hood pulled back to reveal hair arranged in deliberate disorder — not a strand out of place, though it seemed the result of nothing but a breeze. She walked as if the floor had been laid there that morning just for her to pass over it. Behind her, a servant lingered, arms full of hatboxes.

Afanasy's eyes followed her movements, though he kept his head slightly bowed.

"She doesn't see me," he thought. "None of them do. I'm the air behind the drapes, the shadow between chairs. If I burst into flame, she'd think the fireplace had misbehaved."

She stopped near the mirror, adjusting one earring absently, then let out another soft laugh at something in her memory. The sound was light, precise — the kind of laugh one practices in drawing rooms, a lace-gloved sound meant to flatter the room, not the joke.

"She's not a person," Afanasy thought. "She's an arrangement. A painting of a girl someone hung in the wrong century."

He studied her the way one might study a portrait in a cold museum — not with longing, not exactly. Her presence reminded him of everything his life had not become. She was youth without weight. Beauty without hunger. She would never know the taste of boiled onions three days in a row. Her fingers would never blister from ink. She would never sit in a room and feel the wallpaper pressing in like silence made solid.

"She's not meant to feel anything," he thought. "That's why they make them beautiful. So they don't need to."

The Baron rose to greet her, arms open. She kissed him lightly on both cheeks, then floated past the desk without so much as a glance toward Afanasy. Her perfume lingered behind her like a farewell she hadn't offered.

Afanasy's pencil moved again, slow now, as if the ink had thickened.

"She could've looked at me," he thought. "Just once. Not out of kindness — I don't want that — but out of acknowledgment. Just to say, 'Yes, I see you exist.' But that would break the illusion. And I am not in their painting."

He returned his eyes to the paper, but the words blurred slightly. The sound of her laughter still hung in the room.

Afanasy returned to his desk slowly, his steps silent, as if he feared startling the furniture with his presence. The soft click of the door closing behind Gromov's daughter still echoed in his ears, though the perfume had already begun to fade. He lowered himself onto the wooden chair with a sigh that never made it past his throat, the familiar groan of the seat meeting him like an old insult.

The pile of letters waited, squat and accusing, neatly stacked in the same careless way they always were. Heavy stock paper, thick with flourishes and gold-trimmed crests. Red wax seals, ribbons, envelopes lined with silk. An entire forest sacrificed so that Prince This might acknowledge Count That about a dinner moved from Friday to Thursday. Or worse — condolences sent for some distant relative no one had liked but everyone must now mourn with theatrical gravity.

He picked up the first, broke the seal, and scanned the contents.

“Ah yes,” he thought. “A reminder that the Baron’s piano must be tuned before the fifteenth. Urgent matters of state.”

He laid it aside and opened another.

“A request to reschedule a luncheon due to an unexpected trip to Tsarskoye Selo. Yes, of course — the weight of empire rests on cold chicken and cucumber slices.”

He didn’t smile. He was too old for humor now. It had settled into something quiet, like sediment.

He took up his pen and began transcribing replies from the day before, copying out lines dictated by Gromov with all the enthusiasm of someone recording the yawns of the idle.

“‘His Excellency regrets the clash of engagements…’”

He paused, dipped the pen again, and muttered softly, “They always regret. But never enough to stop.”

The scratch of nib on paper filled the silence, fast, mechanical. He could copy these phrases with his eyes closed now.

“‘It would be the utmost pleasure…’” he thought. “Pleasure for whom? No one ever seems pleased. They eat, they speak, they shuffle through rooms filled with music and champagne, and then return home to write letters about how dreadful it all was. And I am the one who must put that dreariness in ink.”

He opened another envelope.

“An invitation to a poetry recital,” he read silently. “No doubt another evening where men in waistcoats praise the moon and each other’s metaphors, while the servants hold their coats and shiver in the dark.”

He sorted the letters by reply urgency, a task no one had ever thanked him for. He knew exactly which handwriting belonged to which house, which seal meant real business and which simply meant a child’s name day.

“This is my empire,” he thought. “Paper. Ink. Wax. Words that mean nothing, passed between people who feel nothing, delivered by hands that go unnoticed.”

He pressed harder with the pen, leaving a blot in the corner of one line. He didn’t bother to blot it. Let the smudge stand.

“Let it show I was here,” he thought. “Even if only as a mistake.”

The sleet fell sideways across the city, not with drama but with that weary, slapping insistence that made the streets glisten like coal and the sky sag like a soaked curtain. Afanasy walked with his head low, scarf pulled tight across his mouth, the wind threading its

fingers down the back of his collar. Each step through the slush felt like wading through a punishment he hadn't earned — or perhaps one he had, but long ago, and forgotten the cause.

Around him, the city moved with its usual indifference: carriage wheels hissing through the muck, bootsteps quick and cautious, men hunched into their coats, faces turned from the sting. Lamps lit early flickered behind fogged glass, and signs swayed on iron hinges. A dog barked somewhere and was answered by silence.

"I endure," Afanasy thought, adjusting the satchel that knocked rhythmically against his hip. "Not because I must, but because I was made for it. Some are carved for comfort. I was shaped for weather like this — for silence, for cold, for the long, gray walk."

He passed the same baker's window he always passed, the glow inside laughing at him with golden warmth, the loaves lined like sleeping children, soft and untouched by sleet. He did not stop. He never stopped.

"Bread is not for the soul," he muttered. "They feed the body and let the soul starve. I do the reverse."

He crossed near the canal, where the wind sharpened and the water below looked like ink left out in winter — thick, motionless, waiting. A woman hurried past with her skirt lifted and eyes downcast, boots splashed and sodden. A coachman cursed the ruts in the street as his wheel struck something hidden beneath the slush. No one saw him. No one ever did.

And yet, he thought, "I walk through their world like a man bearing a secret flame. They do not see it. But that is their blindness, not my fault. My suffering is not their burden to recognize — it is mine to carry."

He imagined himself in a fresco, dimly lit by candlelight, the kind one finds in a side chapel no one enters. A thin figure, haloed not by gold but by shadow, standing alone in rags, face lifted toward a God that never answers.

"I am the saint they forgot to name," he thought. "A martyr not of belief, but of truth. I do not protest. I do not scream. I observe, and I endure. They will build statues for lesser men."

The wind pushed him sideways as he turned down his street. The sleet had soaked his coat through now; it clung to his shoulders like accusation. The hem slapped against his boots with each step, but he did not hurry. To hurry would be to admit discomfort. To admit discomfort would be to lower himself to their level.

He reached the door of his building, paint peeled and lock rusted. He paused, hand on the knob, and looked once back down the street.

"They dance," he thought. "They laugh. They dictate. But they would crumble in this coat. One week in my room and their souls would rattle apart."

Then, quietly, to the wind, to no one: "I am not one of them."

He opened the door and disappeared inside, the sleet falling harder now, washing the street of footprints before they had time to mean anything at all.

The Hallway Sermon

The walls were always thin in the building — thin enough that secrets died quickly, conversations spread like rot, and silence, when it came, felt earned. That morning, as Afanasy sat on the edge of his mattress peeling a callus from his palm with a thumbnail, the sound of arguing drifted in through the cracked plaster above the stove. It began low, like the growl of a dog, then rose, gaining sharpness, until every syllable thudded against his wall with theatrical clarity.

"I told you it was *my* coal, Galina Ivanovna!" shouted the voice of the soldier's widow from the end of the corridor. "You boiled your linen water on it last week without asking. I kept silent then. But today—"

"I use what is available!" came the reply, dry and choked with phlegm. That was old Anastasya Filippovna, three rooms down, who smelled of salt fish and camphor. "You think the samovar knows whose coal it drinks?"

The word *samovar* struck the wall like a pan lid. Afanasy froze, listening.

"Of course," he thought. "Another war for three spoonfuls of warmth."

The sound of slippers slapping the wooden floor echoed as someone stomped away. A tin cup rolled, clanged, then went silent. Then came the groaning scrape of the samovar being dragged, not lifted, across the kitchen tiles.

"Like jackals around a carcass," Afanasy thought, leaning back onto his elbows. "Not for meat. Not for glory. But to say, 'This rib is mine. You take that bone, and no more.'"

The quarrel flared again — voices tangled now, overlapping complaints about water levels, firewood, someone's child knocking over a teacup the week before. Names were flung with the hard-edged tone of familiarity turned sour. Someone mentioned lice. Someone else threatened to speak to the landlord. All of it so familiar, so precise, like lines from a script they all knew by heart.

"They do this because it's the only moment they are seen," Afanasy thought. "No one notices them in the market. No one bows to them in the street. But here, in this corridor, they are generals."

He stood and walked softly to the corner where the wall met the door. The sound was clearer here. Someone was crying now — the widow, maybe — or pretending to. The wail was theatrical, held just long enough to be noticed, then quieted into sniffles.

“They call it dignity,” he thought, “but it’s closer to theater. Even their suffering begs for applause.”

He touched the wall gently with his knuckles.

“No one argues over philosophy here,” he murmured. “No one curses the injustice of power or wonders aloud why we live in cold rooms and eat bread that tastes of stone. No — it’s the coal. The spoon. The silence after someone takes more than they deserve.”

And then, more quietly, almost without sound: “It is the same war they fight upstairs. Only the chandeliers are different.”

The voices outside continued. A door slammed. The kettle whistled. The corridor quieted again, leaving behind only the soft, persistent creak of a world still turning under too much weight.

Afanasy sat down slowly, folded his arms, and closed his eyes.

“Let them fight,” he thought. “It is the one song they know by heart.”

The silence that followed the quarrel was not peace but fatigue — the hush after too much has been said and too little changed. Afanasy remained seated on the edge of his bed, the room still cold around him, his fingers laced together loosely in his lap. The kettle in the kitchen continued to whistle beyond the wall, unattended, shrill and pointless, like a plea made to the wrong god.

“They think victory means getting the samovar first,” he thought. “As if that steam means something. As if boiling water is triumph.”

He exhaled through his nose, slow and contemptuous.

“Everything is small with them. Their joys, their arguments, their insults, their memories — all boiled down like their food. Potatoes, always potatoes. Boiled, crushed, mashed, gray and soft and dead before it’s even chewed. Their minds are no different. Steamed into softness. Nothing sharp left. No blade. No question.”

He looked down at the floorboards, tracing a crack that ran between them like a vein. Dust sat in the corners, untouched. The window was fogged again, though the light behind it was weak, unwilling.

“They fear thinking,” he thought. “They fear what would happen if they stood still and asked why. It’s easier to fight over kettles. Over rags. Over who’s turn it is to clean the hall. I’ve seen them hurl curses over socks.”

A child’s laugh rang faintly through the corridor, high-pitched, brief. Afanasy didn’t smile.

“And yet they breed,” he thought. “They fill these halls with more mouths, more soft minds. A whole corridor of complaints, all passed down like heirlooms.”

He stood and crossed the room, pressing his palm against the windowpane. It was cold, wet. The city beyond had not changed. Sennaya Square would still be clogged with carts and muddy boots, men shouting over fish, women elbowing past each other for cabbage.

He turned from the window and sat back on the stool, resting his elbows on his knees.

“I’m no better than them. Not in coin, not in comfort. But I have one thing they’ve all surrendered — thought. I hold questions. I see. I do not chase after tea or argue over a spoon.”

He picked up the book on his table — a tattered volume of essays, translated poorly from French — and flipped through the pages without seeing them.

“They would call this useless,” he thought. “A waste of time. A fool reading ideas instead of boiling soup.”

His mouth curled slightly, not in humor but in resignation.

“Let them eat potatoes,” he whispered. “Let them peel and boil and chew and nod. But I will not be soft. I will not be boiled.”

He let the book drop back onto the table with a soft thud. The kettle in the corridor had gone quiet. The heat had run out. No one had answered its whistle.

Afanasy sat in stillness for a while, listening to the slow return of silence in the corridor, a silence that had no dignity to it, only exhaustion. The quarrel had dissolved into the kind of quiet that came not from resolution but from the fact that people had simply run out of breath. And now the only sounds were the groan of old pipes and the faint ticking of a clock somewhere down the hall.

“I am not like them,” he thought, fingers folded under his chin. “I am not made for spoon fights and damp potatoes. I do not shout over water. I do not trade dignity for coal.”

He said it quietly this time, out loud to the room, as if trying to convince it — or himself.

“I was meant for more. There’s something in me. A core. An edge. I feel the weight of things they don’t even know exist. I ask questions in silence. I carry thought like a wound.”

He glanced toward the drawer and hesitated, then slowly pulled it open. Inside, half-wrapped in an old rag, was a small pocket mirror with a crack running from corner to corner. He hadn’t looked at it in weeks. He told himself he didn’t need to — that truth came from within. But now, some quiet pull urged him to take it out.

He held it in his hand, carefully, as though it might accuse him. Then he lifted it to his face.

The reflection was dull, distorted slightly by the crack, as though even the glass could not agree on who he was. His eyes looked sunken, circled with shadows. His skin had the waxy pallor of someone who rarely saw sun. His hair, though combed by habit, was greased and

limp. And his collar — the shirt he had convinced himself was presentable — was yellowed with sweat and stiff with age.

He stared for a long time. The face in the mirror didn't blink.

"So this is the elevated soul," he thought. "Ink-stained fingers, a worn coat, and the smell of cabbage clinging to everything like failure."

The collar turned his stomach. He touched it, rubbed at the stain with his thumb, then dropped his hand.

"They don't see me because there's nothing to see," he thought. "Not a scholar. Not a poet. Just another poor man with opinions."

His grip on the mirror tightened, then loosened again. He set it back in the drawer and closed it gently.

"I am not them," he said again. But his voice this time was quieter, as if the room had taken something from it.

He returned to the stool, sat, and folded his hands once more. The cold returned to the tips of his fingers. The air was still. Nothing had changed.

The kitchen smelled of wet stone and leftover grease, the kind that clings to pans long after they've been scrubbed with cold water and bad soap. Afanasy stepped in quietly, avoiding the loose floorboard that squealed when touched. The stove was out. A bucket sat near the drain, half-filled with gray water and the stale scent of yesterday's cabbage.

Nadia stood by the basin, her sleeves rolled to the elbows, forearms thick and red with cold. A heap of laundry slouched at her feet, steam rising from a cracked enamel bowl where a shirt sleeve floated like a drowned thing. She turned as he entered, eyes narrowing.

"Well, look who's finally come to sniff the mold with the rest of us," she said, brandishing a dripping rag like a priest with a relic. "I've seen rats move with more purpose."

Afanasy didn't respond. He kept his eyes low, not submissive, but fixed — as if staring past her to something invisible behind the wall.

"You think you're too good to bathe like the rest of us?" she went on, sniffing and wiping her nose on the back of her wrist. "You walk around with that collar stiff as bone and think nobody notices. It smells like you slept inside your ink pot."

She moved toward him a step, hips brushing against the table.

"Filthy. Pig-like," she said flatly. "That coat's seen more seasons than I've had husbands. And you're starting to rot into it."

Her breath was thick with the sour smell of teeth not brushed in days, her own shirt clinging to her in damp patches under the arms, the stink of labor rising off her in waves.

Afanasy said nothing. He didn't flinch, didn't nod, didn't meet her eye. He simply stood there, hands in his coat pockets, the cold creeping under the cuffs of his sleeves.

Nadia huffed, slapping a wet sheet into the tub with force. Water splashed onto the floor. She muttered something under her breath — a curse, a prayer, or maybe just a sound to fill the space his silence left behind.

Still he stood.

He reached for the tin cup on the shelf, filled it from the jug, and drank. The water tasted like tin and soap. He set it back without sound and turned to leave.

Behind him, Nadia was already speaking to the laundry again, cursing the stiffness of sleeves and the way the steam made her chest ache. Afanasy didn't hear it. He was already walking down the corridor, wet footprints trailing behind him, carrying the scolding like another layer of coat.

The corridor was dim as always, lit by the weak gas lamp that cast shadows down the cracked walls like vines climbing a ruin. Afanasy walked slowly, his shoulders damp where Nadia's shouting had somehow settled into him like steam, as if her words had weight, and now he carried them under his coat.

He reached his room and shut the door behind him without a sound, pressing it closed with the same care a monk might close a book of scripture. The silence welcomed him, as it always did, not with warmth but with understanding. No one here would speak. No one here would accuse. The walls simply waited.

He sat on the stool, hands resting on his knees, back straight. His fingers still smelled faintly of old water and wood soap. He stared at the floorboards for a long time, not thinking, just being, like a statue in a room that had forgotten what it was supposed to honor.

Then slowly, the thought came — clear, sharp, familiar.

"She hates me because I see," he thought. "Not because I smell. Not because my collar is dirty. That's just a pretext. What she really hates is that I don't grovel beside her. That I carry something she can't name."

He looked toward the drawer where the mirror lay hidden again.

"I didn't shout back. I didn't bark like she wanted. She needs noise. I give her silence. And that terrifies her."

His breath was steady now, calm, even proud.

"They all feel it — that difference. They see a man who listens, who watches, who does not beg for scraps of warmth. And they think, he must be judging me. And maybe I am. But not with cruelty. With sorrow. With clarity."

He pressed a palm to his chest, over the threadbare shirt, feeling the steady rhythm beneath.

“Perhaps this is the price,” he thought. “They scorn the man who does not belong. They hiss at what they cannot change. Nadia spat because she saw something she couldn’t name — something that refused to lower itself.”

A faint smile passed across his face, not joyous, but resolved.

“They think the nobleman lives in marble halls and silk coats. But true nobility is to endure the stink, the cold, the cruelty — and remain inwardly clean. They despise the man who sees truth, because it unmasks them. My silence shows them their noise.”

He sat for a while longer, still and upright, like a judge without a courtroom, a priest without a prayer.

“Let them hate,” he thought. “Let them curse. I will remain.”

And then, almost a whisper to the silence, a phrase not meant for anyone but himself:

“I am the only pure soul in this building.”

A Visit to the Noble Floor

The summons came as a folded note, carried in the thin white hand of one of the messenger boys — a boy who always smelled faintly of ink and too much cologne, as though trying to mimic the very men who stepped over him. Afanasy opened the slip with the caution he reserved for anything written in too few words and with too much space between them.

To the upper floor. Kuratov requires a delivery. Now.

That was all. No name, no title, no greeting.

He folded it again, tucked it into his satchel, and stood. The boy was already gone, his footsteps vanishing down the hall like guilt. Afanasy put on his coat without haste, gathered the sheaf of papers he’d copied that morning — permissions, inspections, useless affirmations dressed in formalities — and made his way toward the stairs.

The climb to the upper floor was always a peculiar ascent. The air changed — it grew cleaner, less damp, scented faintly with polish and something else... roses, perhaps. Money, more likely. The floorboards creaked less. The walls bore wainscoting and framed maps that no one read. The silence was thicker here, not born of fatigue like on the lower floor, but of expectation.

At the top, the corridor turned sharply. A secretary nodded once, barely, and pointed to a door with brass trim.

Afanasy knocked, once. A voice — brittle and cold — replied, “Enter.”

He stepped in.

Prince Kuratov sat at a vast desk that seemed to be made of a single slab of mahogany, its surface reflecting the light of the tall windows like a frozen pond. The prince was thin, swathed in dark wool, and surrounded by high-backed chairs that no one ever sat in. His hands trembled, but not from age alone — there was something too deliberate about the shaking, as if he resented his body for betraying his stillness. His face was pale and dry, lips thin, and his eyes... those were the most remarkable part. Cold. Not cruel, not angry. Just cold, like something once alive that had been left in the snow too long.

Afanasy approached and placed the stack of papers on the edge of the desk without a word. Kuratov didn't thank him. He merely reached out, his hand hovering for a second before picking up the top sheet with slow, precise fingers.

"From Baron Gromov?" he asked, his voice low and gravelly.

"Yes," Afanasy replied.

Kuratov gave a small nod. His hand shook slightly as he drew the paper closer. His eyes scanned it without interest.

"Always so many words to say so little," he muttered.

Afanasy remained still, the silence settling between them like dust.

"He is the kind who feeds on formality," Afanasy thought. "But this one — Kuratov — he feeds on the silence beneath it."

The prince laid the page aside and picked up the next, his lips twitching almost imperceptibly.

Afanasy watched him from the corner of his eye. The prince's fingers were long, pale, spotted with veins like blue thread beneath parchment. Every motion deliberate, every breath measured.

"This is what time does to power," Afanasy thought. "It doesn't strip it — it calcifies it. Until what remains is stone with a crown."

Kuratov spoke again without looking up.

"You're Gromov's clerk?"

"Yes."

A pause.

"You write well. I've seen your script. Precise. Without ornament."

Afanasy nodded once.

"I prefer silence to flourishes," he said.

At that, the prince finally looked up. His eyes fixed on Afanasy's face for the first time. They were pale gray, the color of winter sky at dusk. There was no warmth in them. Only curiosity.

"Good," the prince said. "Flourishes are for liars."

Then he returned to the paper.

Afanasy stood in silence, the cold from the window behind the desk wrapping around his ankles like fog. He did not move. Not yet.

The silence stretched, thick as wool and just as suffocating. Prince Kuratov flipped through the pages slowly, his thin fingers lifting each sheet with the delicacy of someone sorting relics instead of routine reports. Afanasy stood motionless, his arms at his sides, eyes fixed on a dark knot in the floorboard just beyond the desk. No further words came from the prince — only the soft whisper of paper and the occasional creak of the chair as the old man adjusted his weight.

Then, from the corner, came the soft tick of claws on polished wood.

The dog — a small, pale creature with absurdly fine fur and watery eyes — padded into view. It was a ridiculous animal, the sort that had never known a leash, let alone mud or hunger. Its nails had the sheen of careful grooming, and a thin velvet ribbon clung around its neck like a medal for surviving comfort. It moved slowly toward Afanasy and began to sniff.

He did not move, though he felt the familiar knot of embarrassment tightening in his stomach.

The dog circled once, pressed its nose to the hem of his coat, then to his boots — damp, salt-stained, the stitching frayed. It snuffled, paused, then gave a sudden, sharp sneeze and turned away.

Prince Kuratov did not look up.

Afanasy stood frozen, every muscle stiff. The sneeze had been quick, careless — the kind a man gives when waving away smoke or a foul scent. The dog had made no sound, no growl, no bark. Just that one small burst of breath, and then dismissal.

"He finds me distasteful," Afanasy thought. "Even the dog."

His ears began to burn. A hot ripple moved down the back of his neck and across his shoulders — shame, swift and sickly. He clenched his fingers in his coat pockets, unable to stop the warmth from spreading down his chest and into his gut.

For a moment he felt lower than the dog and thought. "It smelled me, weighed me, and decided I was not worth knowing."

The room around him blurred slightly. He imagined the prince glancing up, not to speak, but to smirk, to nod toward the mutt and say, *Yes, even my animal has standards.*

But the prince said nothing. He continued reading, as if Afanasy no longer existed.

“That sneeze,” he thought bitterly. “Not noise. Judgment. A ceremony. That animal is closer to this man than I am. It sleeps on velvet. I share a wall with coughing and rats.”

He fought the urge to wipe his boots against the floor. It would only draw attention.

The flush did not fade. It sat there in his body like spoiled wine — warmth without comfort, fire without light.

“They have trained even their pets to look down,” he thought. “I carry their words in my hands. But I will never be allowed to lift my eyes.”

He remained perfectly still as the dog circled back to its cushion by the fire and curled into itself, indifferent, like its master.

“He’s a brittle thing,” Afanasy thought, watching the Prince’s fingers tremble over the paper. “A paper king. One push and the whole palace of him might fold like a scrap of cheap cardboard.”

The image rose in him as clean as a bell: the heavy brass candlestick that stood on the Prince’s desk, ornate and useless, catching the light like a small sun. He pictured lifting it, feeling the cold weight settle into his palm, the leather of his gloves creaking, the sound of his own breath filling the room. He imagined stepping forward with the slow certainty of a man who has nothing left to lose. The candlestick would swing in a bright arc, smearing the air with surprise; it would meet flesh with a dull, final note; Prince Kuratov’s head would list and fall like a withered flower. The dog would look up, startled, then return to sleep. The papers would scatter — a white storm of flourishes and seals — and for a single instant the room would be empty of spectacle and full of truth.

“I could do it,” he thought, tasting the words like iron. “Just once. One strong, clean motion. And then — silence.”

The thought did not arrive like a guest but as something that had always been waiting in the wardrobe of his mind, a shabby coat hidden behind more respectable garments. It surprised him that it fit so well. He felt the surge of a small, fierce warmth, a treasure unearthed: power. The idea made his palms damp, made his knees threaten to give as if the body suddenly remembered how to move with decision.

“But I would not,” he thought to himself quickly, as if addressing an accusation. “No. I would not. I am not a brute. I am a man of mind. I am better than that.”

He rehearsed a thousand reasons like worn coins: the law, the jail, the shame his mother would suffer if she still lived, the inconvenience of a trial, the ridiculousness of being remembered for a moment of madness rather than for suffering endured nobly. He pictured the headlines he would never read and felt the neatness of restraint like an old coat wrapped around him.

“They would gag me with their words,” he thought, “call it a fit, a turn of fever. They would sew me into an explanation stitched with mercy. They would say the poor man snapped. They always have the right story ready.”

Still, the image would not leave. It shadowed his steps even as the Prince, indifferent, folded the last of the letters and reached for his spectacles. The dog ruffled itself, stretched, and the silence of the room settled again — ordinary, smug, suffocating.

“If I struck him, I would become what they trust me to be,” he thought, a new bitterness rising. “A beast. An animal obliged to act. They would be pleased for a while: see how the servant behaves when roused. But their pleasure would be temporary. They would return to their rooms and their dances. The scar on my hand would not feed me. It would not warm me.”

He imagined, too, the small, humiliating detail he could not forget: the sneeze. Even the dog had judged him. The thought of lying beneath the dog in the hierarchy of being stung him more than the fantasy of violence. It made the candlestick idea itch like an insect under the skin.

“No,” he repeated aloud in his thought, though no one answered. “I could. I could. But I won’t. That’s the nuance they will never understand.” He sank a fraction closer to the floor in his mind, feeling the heat of shame and the coolness of a decision made by calculation rather than impulse.

He straightened then, smoothing an imaginary crease in his coat, reminding himself of the other option: endurance. To survive another hour, another insult, another sniff and sneeze, and to carry it like proof. Violence would grant him notoriety; endurance might one day allow him meaning, or at least the solace of truth unblunted by spectacle.

“Endure,” he thought, the word like a small prayer. “That’s my answer. To strike is to be known. To endure is to remain unseen and therefore honest.”

Prince Kuratov cleared his throat and said, without looking up, “You may go.”

Afanasy inclined his head and stepped back from the desk. As he turned to leave, the phantom weight of the candlestick still lingered in his hand like a memory — not as violence, but as possibility. He had not lifted it, but the thought had stayed, coiled and silent, like a shadow left behind in the corners of the room.

His hand reached for the door, fingers brushing the handle, when the dry voice of Prince Kuratov broke the hush behind him — flat, indifferent, a sound made of habit more than thought.

“Here. For your trouble.”

Afanasy froze.

A small silver coin slid across the polished surface of the desk behind him, making almost no sound as it spun once, then settled near the blotter. The Prince did not look up. His eyes had already returned to the page, as though his gesture had been reflex, not thought. A flick of the hand, an offering made with the same mechanical detachment one might use to close a window.

Afanasy turned back slowly. His eyes dropped to the ruble. The light caught its edges. Clean, freshly minted, untouched by the fingers of men who counted their wages one coin at a time. He looked at it, then at the Prince, whose hand now hovered above the page with the deliberate poise of someone who had forgotten the moment just before.

“He doesn’t know what he’s done,” Afanasy thought. “He’s given me a full ruble — by mistake, or carelessness, or contempt. A kopeck would be insult enough. A ruble is absurd.”

He didn’t move yet. To speak would be to interrupt. To explain would be to risk being corrected, dismissed, laughed at. Perhaps the Prince would snatch it back with a dry chuckle, muttering, *My dear man, do you take me for a fool?* Perhaps he wouldn’t even remember giving it at all.

Afanasy glanced again at the coin. He could feel the weight of its presence as though it had gravity. It was, for him, no small thing. A ruble could buy candles for the month. A second pair of socks. A brief spell of warmth.

His fingers hesitated in his coat pocket.

“If I take it, it becomes mine,” he thought. “If I refuse it, it becomes his again. And so does the moment.”

He reached out, quietly, and let his fingertips brush the desk. The coin was cool against his skin, smooth, heavier than he expected. He did not look at the Prince. He made no sound. Just the smallest sweep of the hand — practiced, silent, ashamed — and the ruble vanished into his coat.

Kuratov did not speak.

Afanasy stepped back, bowed slightly — the kind of bow no one sees — and turned again toward the door.

“It is theft,” he thought. “But only if someone notices. It is a gift, if no one does.”

He left the room without a word. The coin burned in his pocket like a brand. He did not touch it again, not yet. But he felt it there — not as currency, but as a question.

Later that evening, back in his narrow room where the wind rattled the loose windowpane and the air held the faint sourness of boiled cloth, Afanasy sat on the edge of his bed with the ruble in his palm. He hadn’t spent it. Not yet. He had taken it out carefully, set it on the small table beside the cold stove, and now he looked at it like one might study an unfamiliar object found in the street — curious, uncertain whether to keep it or bury it.

The silver glinted faintly in the half-light. It was clean. Unblemished. A perfect coin, as if no hand had held it long enough to spoil it.

He exhaled slowly through his nose.

“A mistake, perhaps,” he thought. “A flick of the wrist without attention. Or maybe he thought I was someone else — the sort of man who receives rubles like thank-you notes. But that doesn’t matter now.”

He picked it up again, turned it between his fingers, felt its weight. It was not heavy, but it was real.

“It is mine,” he decided, without hesitation this time. “Not stolen. Not begged. Earned.”

He stood and crossed the room once, then back again. The floor creaked. Outside, someone coughed in the corridor — deep, wet, familiar. The sound of another body failing in private.

“I stood in his presence,” Afanasy thought, “like a statue. I let his dog sneeze on me. I endured the silence, the indifference, the... transaction of it all.”

He stopped by the window and looked out, the city smeared with sleet and smoke.

“That ruble,” he thought, “is not payment for carrying papers. It’s payment for being invisible. For being the man who does not flinch, who does not speak, who swallows insult without twitching.”

He turned from the window, the ruble still warm in his palm now.

“They say the poor must earn every crumb. Fine. I’ve earned this. Not with sweat. Not with blisters. But with humiliation. With stillness. With restraint. I endured what another man would have shouted down. And that has value.”

He returned to the table, placed the coin back on the wood, centered it carefully.

“It is not a gift,” he thought. “It is compensation.”

And though he felt no joy — no rush of fortune, no giddy sense of advantage — he did feel something harder, more useful: a kind of grim satisfaction, as if a scale somewhere had been tipped one grain back in his favor.

“For what I carry,” he whispered, “this is nothing. But it is owed.”

And then he blew out the lamp.

Snow and Strangers

The street was a churning artery of slush, gray and foul, streaked with the detritus of the passing day — coal soot, bits of straw, refuse from carts. Carriages passed in jerks and

splashes, their wheels hissing through the sludge, flinging it onto the boots of passersby who cursed under their breath and quickened their pace. The sky above hung low, a lid of dirty cotton, threatening more snow but delivering only damp weight. Smoke curled from chimneys into the cold air like tired sighs, then vanished before reaching anything like sky.

Afanasy walked with his shoulders slightly hunched, not from the weather, but from the press of the crowd that shifted and spilled around him — shopkeepers dragging crates, a toothless woman selling sour apples from a basket, a drunk singing an operatic phrase that ended in a coughing fit. The smells mixed without order: horse sweat, wet bread, tallow, fish, pipe smoke.

He moved through it all unnoticed, his coat stained at the cuffs, boots leaving dark half-prints that melted almost instantly behind him. In the distance, a bell rang the hour — not for him, but for someone whose time mattered.

Then, at the corner near the apothecary, he saw a boy.

Thin, not more than eight or nine, wrapped in what looked like a woman's coat cut down crudely, the sleeves dragging, one shoe missing. His cheeks were red with cold, raw at the edges. A cracked bowl sat before him, resting crooked on the ice. His hands were bare. One was extended toward the passing crowd, more out of habit than hope.

The boy's eyes met his.

Afanasy didn't stop. His feet continued forward, slow and sure, boots sloshing through the slush. He passed within inches of the boy, close enough to hear the child's breath, quick and tight from cold or hunger or both.

He gave nothing.

He didn't reach into his coat for the ruble. He didn't offer even a kopeck. Not a glance, not a word, not a crumb of acknowledgment.

"He is the mirror," Afanasy thought as he moved past. "That's what frightens me. Not the need. The resemblance."

He walked on, the sound of the street swallowing everything behind him.

"If I stop," he thought, "I admit we are the same. One misstep, one month, and I could be squatting beside him, hand outstretched, depending on the mercy of men who never learned my name."

He passed a butcher's shop, the smell of blood and salt briefly overwhelming. He turned his head slightly, not from disgust, but from memory.

"They call it compassion," he thought. "But what they mean is distance. They give coins to children so they can forget how close they are to them."

He kept walking, coat flapping behind him like a flag that no one saluted.

“I give him nothing,” he thought, “because I have nothing. Nothing that wouldn’t cost me more than it would feed him. And nothing I could give him would make either of us less invisible.”

The wind picked up. Snow began to fall again — soft, wet, mean.

Behind him, the boy said nothing. He had not begged aloud. And now, like a shadow cut from the street, he sank back into the cold, waiting for someone more generous or less afraid.

Afanasy did not look back.

He turned from the market square and followed the curve of the canal, where the water flowed thick and sluggish beneath a skin of half-frozen scum. The embankment rose slightly above the street, paved in slick stones that shone with melt and foot traffic. Lampposts stood at regular intervals like tired sentries, their glass fogged from within, barely holding back the dull weight of the afternoon.

Here, the city softened. The shouts of vendors thinned. The crush of the poor receded behind him like a tide pulling back to expose cleaner stone.

Ahead, he saw students.

They gathered near the railing, where the embankment opened to a view of the canal. They always did. Four or five of them, sometimes more, wrapped in scarves of fine wool and bright dyes, the ends tossed carelessly over shoulders as if style could banish the cold. Long coats, polished boots, gloved hands holding cigarettes in fingers that had never known work. Laughter — too loud, too relaxed — carried on the wind, artificial and invulnerable.

Afanasy slowed, not out of caution, but something older, more resigned. He walked with the canal to his left and the students to his right, keeping his eyes forward. But he listened.

“They speak in citations,” he thought. “Books they haven’t finished. Opinions they haven’t earned.”

One of them quoted a French philosopher — poorly. Another scoffed at an exam, called it “trivial” with the disdain of someone who would still stay up all night to pass it. They leaned against the railing like they had time to spare and no debts to fear. One of them, a tall young man with thick hair and a jaw meant for paintings, tossed his cigarette into the canal with theatrical boredom.

“They are drunk on the idea of themselves,” Afanasy thought. “The future presses its lips to their foreheads each morning.”

He glanced at one of them — a girl, perhaps nineteen, her cheeks flushed with cold and some private laughter. She wore a green scarf, the fabric fine enough to shimmer where it caught the light. Her hand rested on the shoulder of the young man beside her, absentminded, like it belonged there.

“They live in a world where affection is casual,” he thought. “Where the body is warm, not because of necessity, but by choice.”

He adjusted the collar of his coat and walked on. No one noticed him. He was part of the street — a figure blurred by snow, indistinguishable from the workers, the clerks, the men who drifted between purpose and exhaustion.

“They speak of change,” he thought. “Of truth and revolution. But none of them has felt hunger gnaw through speech. They write manifestos between courses. They print outrage with family money.”

A student called out across the street to a friend, voice bright with pretense.

“You’ll see,” Afanasy thought. “They’ll get older. Most will become lawyers. Some, professors. The loudest will become ministers of something or other. And every one of them will forget the canal, the scarf, the girl with the laughter. They will become what they once mocked.”

He passed them without turning his head, and once again, his footsteps melted behind him as if he had never been there at all.

Afanasy’s boots struck the wet stone with rhythmic complaint as he moved beyond the sound of their voices, the last echo of a joke trailing off behind him like smoke. The canal widened ahead, the water sluggish and dark beneath a crust of slush. The wind rolled off it with teeth. He pulled his collar higher and kept walking, the air tasting of ash and melt.

He began to speak aloud, barely above a whisper, as if testing the sound of his thoughts in the open air.

“Empty heads,” he muttered, “but full of echoes. Not a thought in them that wasn’t printed first in a book they only half understood.”

He shook his head slowly, as if dislodging the very memory of them.

“They call it passion — their laughter, their arguments, their certainty. But it’s not passion. It’s rehearsal. Practice for a life they already know they’ll be safe in. They argue because they can afford to.”

He turned his gaze briefly back toward the embankment, though the students were out of sight now. Just the sound remained in his ears — the cadence of privilege.

“Arrogant little princes in wool scarves,” he said under his breath. “None of them ever shivered because the stove went cold. None of them ever rationed soap. They strut and pout and speak of injustice while their laundry is still folded by someone else’s mother.”

His pace quickened, almost unconsciously. The thought of them stuck to him like wet cloth.

“Youth,” he spat. “They treat it like armor. They think their opinions are sharpened by it, that their youth makes them holy. But they’ve never endured anything. Not time. Not silence. Not want.”

A man passed him going the opposite way, and Afanasy fell quiet, letting the muttering become a breath again. Once alone, he resumed, more to himself than before.

“They will forget,” he said. “All of it. Their faces will soften with comfort. Their fire will turn to pride. And one day, they’ll see a boy begging in the street and speak of systems, not hunger. And they’ll convince themselves they care.”

He paused at a railing and looked down into the water. A pale crust of ice moved along the surface, slow and blind.

“I was never given the time to be that foolish,” he whispered. “I came into this world already cold.”

He stood there for a while, watching the slow pull of the canal, until his fingers stiffened and the wind needled the corners of his eyes. Then he turned and kept walking, leaving his words to fade into the churn of water and snow.

Just past the bend in the embankment, where the traffic thinned and the brick facades bore the soot of years, a small wooden stool sat crooked beneath a streetlamp. Next to it stood a folding easel, propped with a sheet of coarse paper, half-covered in the sketched likeness of a ruddy-faced man — the kind of face that laughed too often and drank too early. The artist sat hunched nearby, bundled in a patched coat, his gloved fingers smudged with charcoal. He looked up as Afanasy approached.

“Sir,” the artist said, lifting his hand in greeting. “A moment. Let me sketch you — no charge. I’ve been working on faces of the city. Yours would be a strong one.”

Afanasy slowed, surprised, more by the offer than the voice. The man’s tone was not mocking, nor was it falsely polite. It was the even, rehearsed appeal of someone who has asked this question a hundred times a day and has learned how not to expect anything from it.

He looked at the easel, then at the man’s bag of tools — charcoal, stumps, a few wrinkled papers weighted down with stones. Rain had touched some of them. One was crumpled by the wind.

The artist gestured again, inviting.

“No,” Afanasy said flatly, his voice low. “No, thank you.”

The man tilted his head, eyes narrowing slightly, but without offense. “I don’t mean to trouble. There’s something in your face… the way you hold yourself. Like a man who’s seen too much.”

Afanasy’s lips tightened, not into a smile.

“I am not for decoration,” he said.

The artist blinked.

“I do not belong among your sketched vendors and slouched officers,” Afanasy continued. “I am not a moment to be captured. I am not a mood, or a shadow in a streetlamp’s glow. My face is not meant for your paper. It was made to vanish.”

The man said nothing for a moment. A breeze tugged at the loose corner of one of his drawings.

“You’ve got a poet’s answer,” the artist said eventually, quietly. “But even ghosts have faces.”

Afanasy turned his head slightly, then looked back down the street. He could feel the ruble in his pocket like a reminder, like a weight hung from the thread of his coat.

“Then let them draw the living,” he said. “Not the ones passing through.”

He walked on.

Behind him, the artist did not call out again. He returned to his stool, adjusting the angle of his paper with a calm touch. The sketch he’d begun — half of a laughing jaw, half of a disappearing eye — waited for another man to sit and be seen.

By the time Afanasy reached the door of his building, the snow had turned to a fine, wet mist, the kind that soaked without sound. His coat clung to him, heavy and sullen. His boots had gone soft with water, each step a slow surrender. The brass doorknob was slick and cold beneath his palm, and the wood groaned as he pushed inside, the hallway dim and thick with the scent of boiled onions and old smoke.

He climbed the stairs slowly, knees aching, shoulder burning where he’d held his satchel too long. Each step up felt like wading through the fog of a day that had offered no rest, only small humiliations and silent battles. At the third-floor landing, he paused, listening. A child cried faintly behind one door. Someone coughed with that dry, peeling sound that meant winter had settled deep into the lungs. Nothing had changed.

Inside his room, the air was close and still, thick with the cold that never truly left. He stripped off the coat, shook it once, then hung it over the chair. He stood for a moment, staring at it, as if waiting for it to speak.

Then he moved to the window, the glass already misted over. He wiped it with his sleeve and looked out over the street. A cart clattered by. A figure hurried past under a broken umbrella. The sky was already losing light.

In his chest, the familiar churn returned — not hunger, not grief, but something sharper and more private: the residue of imagined triumph.

“They saw me today,” he thought. “Each of them, in their own way. They looked, and they turned away — but they saw.”

He pulled the ruble from his pocket and turned it in the light, watching it flash once, then go dull again.

“The prince gave me this without knowing. That was my victory. I took it without thanks. That was my refusal.”

He set it down beside the lamp, next to his pen and ink, a small silver trophy for a day endured. He sat, slowly, fingers stiff and legs sore, every joint a chorus of cold.

“I refused the artist’s sketch. That was my choice. They will draw fools and lovers. But not me. Not the one who sees.”

He leaned back against the chair, staring up at the ceiling, where a water stain spread like a continent across plaster.

“They laughed, the students. But I walked through their laughter and left it behind.”

His lips barely moved as he whispered, “I am not among them. I am above them.”

Outside, the snow hissed against the windowsill, soft as breath.

Inside, Afanasy sat in the darkening room, not triumphant, not content, but full — full of small, silent victories against invisible enemies, carried like medals under his ribs.

Reflections in a Glass

The evening settled into the room with its usual hush, broken only by the faint tapping of snow against the windowpane and the slow creak of wood contracting in the cold. Afanasy moved without urgency, lighting the stub of a candle on the desk, its flame catching with a shudder as if reluctant to live. The pale light revealed the disorder of his small domain — a frayed blanket folded over the chair, the ink bottle with its crusted lip, and the drawer half-open where papers lay in loose, forgotten stacks.

He reached for a blank page, intending to copy a document he'd brought home from the Ministry, but his fingers instead brushed a brittle corner of something tucked beneath the sheaf. He pulled it out gently.

The paper was yellowed, the creases worn soft from having been folded and refolded many times. The ink had faded to brown. His name was written on the front — not “Comrade,” not “Sir,” not the blunt scrawl of office business — but simply “Afanasy,” in cursive, with a gentle flourish at the tail of the Y.

He paused.

Then slowly, he opened it.

Dear Afanasy, it began, *I hope you'll forgive the boldness of a letter without occasion. I write only because your words have stayed with me.*

His eyes stopped there for a long moment. He remembered the letter now. Not its exact phrasing, but its presence — how it had arrived one afternoon folded neatly between two official memos, and how, upon reading it, he'd stood by the window until the light left the sky, feeling something strange in his chest, like a warmth that had nowhere to go.

Elena. That was her name. Not noble. Not rich. A clerk in another department. He remembered her hair, dark and pinned too tightly. The way she tucked her hands into her sleeves when nervous. The way she listened — really listened — when others spoke, which no one ever did in that building unless they wanted something.

He read on.

You said once that the world rewards the loud and forgets the quiet. That thought struck me, and I wanted to say — I have not forgotten you. Your silence is the first I ever found comforting.

His hand trembled slightly, whether from cold or something older, deeper. He folded the letter back halfway, then opened it again. The edges were torn at one corner.

Why had he kept it? Why had he buried it?

"Because I couldn't answer it," he thought. "Because kindness, when unexpected, becomes unbearable. And because I had nothing to give in return."

He sat slowly, the letter still open in his hand. His reflection in the dark window watched him — pale, indistinct, framed by candlelight like a ghost lingering just behind the glass.

"She saw me," he thought. "Once."

And the thought unsettled him more than any insult ever had.

The candle's flame shifted gently, casting a long shadow behind him as Afanasy stared at the letter, then at the dark window, as if the past might appear there, summoned by memory and silence. He laid the page flat on the desk and leaned back, eyes drifting upward toward the ceiling, though what he saw was not wood or plaster — it was snow, falling gently over a different street, in a different year.

He remembered the bakery.

It had been winter then too, though not as sharp as now. The line stretched down the block, each figure bundled and hunched, breath blooming white in the gray air. The scent of yeast and ash had drifted from the open door in teasing waves, promising warmth and bread that might run out before the end of the queue. Afanasy had stood there alone, as he always did, coat buttoned to the throat, eyes lowered, mind elsewhere.

Then — her voice.

“Elbow to elbow, day after day,” she had said, not loudly, not boldly, but with that soft, amused clarity he had remembered even before the letter. He had turned, slowly, uncertain if the comment had been meant for him. But there she was, three places behind, smiling with a kind of lightness that startled him more than the cold ever had.

“It’s strange,” she had continued when he didn’t speak, “how we all pretend not to know each other in these lines. Same coats. Same hunger. Same silence. Yet we pretend.”

He had nodded, unsure of what to say, and turned back around. But her voice lingered in his ears. And then — just before the line shuffled forward — he had felt her beside him, somehow closing the gap in the snow between them.

She’d looked up at him — no more than a glance — and smiled.

Not flirtation. Not pity. Not habit. Just a small, quiet smile, given freely, without performance. And it had struck him like a match in a cold room.

He remembered thinking, in that precise moment, *She does not expect anything from me. And still, she offers that.*

It had unnerved him. Not because it embarrassed him, but because it left him defenseless.

“I wasn’t ready,” he thought now, eyes fixed on the candle. “I didn’t know how to receive warmth without shrinking from it.”

He never spoke to her again, not directly. He avoided the bakery for weeks afterward. She transferred departments a month later. Then came the letter, and even then, he hadn’t replied.

And yet — here it was. Preserved.

“The city is a machine,” he thought. “It eats days, people, gestures. But not this. This it left untouched.”

He reached out and touched her name at the bottom of the letter, just once, like one might touch a relic behind glass.

“Elena,” he whispered.

And for a moment, the air in the room felt just slightly warmer.

The candle burned lower now, the wax pooling unevenly along the cracked dish where he’d wedged it, and still Afanasy sat motionless, the letter open before him like an unanswered question. The room had gone colder, but he didn’t move for a blanket. He remained seated, shoulders slightly hunched, as if bearing the weight of a voice that had long since faded.

“I never replied,” he murmured, eyes on the paper though he was no longer reading it. “I folded it, hid it, and pretended I didn’t know why.”

The truth lay bare now, plain and unflinching. In those days — in that silence of cramped hallways and dim corridors at the Ministry — her words had reached him like a foreign language. He had read the letter once, twice, and then again in the dark, as if the meaning would shift. And each time, the same thought had returned, dark and sharp:

“She must be mocking me.”

He had imagined it so vividly then — her laughter behind closed doors, the sharing of the letter with colleagues, the little twist of the voice imitating his, slow and strange, the butt of some quiet joke among the younger clerks. The idea had taken root immediately, like rot in damp wood.

“Why else would she write to me?” he had told himself. “What could she want, except to prove I’m laughable?”

Now, with years layered between, the suspicion felt smaller, meaner. Yet even now, part of him still believed it.

“They don’t see us,” he thought. “They don’t speak to us unless there’s something to gain or something to ridicule. That’s how the city works.”

He remembered the way her letter had spoken of silence with gentleness — not as lack, but as a presence she recognized. He’d thought then, *No one sees silence unless they want to fill it.* Her kindness had seemed too precise, too unearned. He hadn’t trusted it. And worse, hadn’t trusted himself to deserve it.

“I buried the letter,” he thought, “because I could not bear being seen — and could not forgive myself if I’d misunderstood it.”

And so he had done nothing. No reply. No glance in the corridor. No thank-you. Just a folding away of something that might have been true, simply because it frightened him.

“What if it wasn’t a joke?” he whispered now, not to the room, but to the space left by years of silence. “What if it was the one real thing?”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, head bowed over the letter like a man at confession.

“She gave me something,” he thought, “and I gave her doubt in return.”

The candle flickered once, bent sideways in a sudden breath of wind from the window crack. The flame righted itself. He did not move to close it. He let the cold in. Let it remind him.

The candle hissed faintly, one corner of its flame fluttering in the draft that crept through the cracked window. The letter lay open before him, the ink faint, the creases deep like veins across its paper skin. Afanasy stared at it for a long while, unblinking, his expression fixed somewhere between reflection and suspicion. The room around him blurred; only the letter remained clear, sharp, like a small accusation in the candlelight.

“She wrote it,” he thought. “I remember her hand. I remember the bakery. Her voice, her smile. I remember—”

He stopped. The words in his head trailed into stillness.

“Do I?”

He leaned back, eyes narrowing, trying to summon her face in the detail he once believed he knew — the curve of her mouth, the way she tucked her hair behind her ear, the sound of her shoes in the hall. But the image refused to settle. It shimmered, blurred, faded. He saw her features dissolve like smoke, until what remained was nothing more than the idea of her, a shadow wearing borrowed warmth.

“What if she never existed at all?” he thought. “What if the world placed her there to test me, to lure me into hope, to make a fool of me?”

The thought came fast, too fast to resist. He felt it seize him like a sudden chill.

“Yes. That would fit. A trick. A small, cruel test. The universe has always done it — offers a crumb of kindness only to snatch it away, laughing.”

He stood abruptly and began to pace the small room, the floorboards creaking beneath his damp socks. The candle flickered violently in his absence, throwing shadows that trembled on the wall like living things.

“They saw me as I was — the quiet clerk, the odd one, the man who doesn’t smile, doesn’t flatter. So they sent a messenger in silk gloves. A letter written in sweetness. A trap disguised as tenderness.”

His voice had grown low, hoarse, but he didn’t stop. He turned again, his eyes fixed on the folded paper on the desk.

“How simple it would be — to make me believe someone noticed me, cared for me, thought I was more than what I am. To make me open my chest to air, only to laugh when I do.”

He pressed his hand to his mouth, as if to quiet himself, though the words continued in his mind, sharp and certain.

“The world has a sense of humor — I’ve seen it in the nobles’ laughter, in the clerk’s sneers, in the cough of the beggar who dies the day after finding bread. Why would it spare me? No, she wasn’t real. She was a ghost they sent to measure how far I’d fall for a kind word.”

He approached the desk again, standing over the letter. The ink shimmered faintly in the trembling light. He touched the paper with his fingertip, felt its fragile coolness.

“But I didn’t fall,” he whispered. “I doubted. I refused. I saw through it.”

A small, grim smile flickered on his face, almost triumph.

“Yes, perhaps that’s the proof of my strength. I was not deceived. The world tried, and I resisted.”

He sat again, the smile fading into exhaustion.

“Real or not, it doesn’t matter,” he thought. “She belongs to the same order as mercy and justice — words written in air, meant for other men.”

He leaned back, eyes half-closed, the candlelight painting the lines of his face in gold and shadow.

“Better to believe she was an illusion,” he thought, “than to admit I ruined something true.”

He stared at the letter for a long while, longer than the shape of it deserved. Folded again now, it sat in the palm of his hand like something faintly alive — like a breath caught in paper, waiting to be released. His thumb ran along the seam once, twice. The paper was dry, delicate, yellowed with the patience of years.

Then, without ceremony, he reached for the candle.

The flame shivered slightly as his hand approached, but he did not pause. He held the edge of the letter over it until the corner darkened, curled, and finally caught.

The fire rose slowly at first — a thin, amber tongue lapping at the words — then began to spread, devouring the bottom line first, then crawling up through the middle. His name vanished into smoke. The careful strokes of her hand — the gentle loops, the restraint — blackened and dissolved into ash.

“I was right to distrust kindness,” he muttered, eyes fixed on the burning paper.

The words came quiet but firm, as if spoken not to justify, but to confirm something long decided.

“Kindness is the first step toward exposure. Toward humiliation. It is the invitation before the fall.”

The flame reached his fingers and he dropped what remained into the dish. It landed with a soft hiss, curling inward like a wounded thing. Smoke lifted, faint and sharp, and for a moment, the room smelled of old ink, dry paper, and something far more human — like the end of a memory.

He sat back, watching the ash settle.

“It is better this way,” he said, though no one could hear him. “Better to destroy the question than live with the silence it leaves.”

He leaned forward and stirred the blackened remains with a matchstick, grinding them gently into a fine gray dust. No lines left. No signature. No trace.

“There is strength in not believing,” he murmured. “The world feeds on men who hope.”

He snuffed out the candle with two fingers, leaving the room in sudden dark. The window still rattled. Snow still fell. But now, there was nothing left in the room that had once spoken kindly to him.

The Laugh of Gentlemen

The sound reached Afanasy before the sight of them — laughter, sharp and careless, cascading down the corridor like coins spilling from an overfilled purse. It wasn't the forced laughter of clerks, nor the drunken bleating of market men. This was the laughter of those who had never been told no, who spoke too loudly because the world was always listening.

He looked up from his desk, fingers still resting on the blotter, ink barely dried on the last line of the inspection letter he had copied. The door to the outer chamber creaked open as a draft swept in with their boots and voices. Four of them — young, overdressed, glowing with the chill of the street still on their cheeks. Their coats were velvet and fur, buttons fastened with unconscious precision. One had a monocle he didn't need. Another wore his gloves halfway on, as if the mere act of removing them were beneath his urgency to entertain.

They were speaking of a duel.

"Imagine," one said, grinning, "he fainted before the pistol was even raised! A grown man! Hadn't even been touched!"

The others burst out laughing, their voices echoing off the tiled ceiling, the sound far too large for the narrow space it occupied. They moved past Afanasy without acknowledgment, as though desks and clerks and walls were all one uninterrupted structure. Afanasy didn't look up, but he listened.

"Pale as milk," said the one with the monocle. "I thought he'd wet himself before the count of three."

"I still don't know why he agreed to it," said another. "It was about a woman, wasn't it? They always think honor lives in trousers."

Their laughter rolled again, fuller this time, unguarded and pleased with itself. Afanasy's pen hovered over the paper. His eyes fixed on a small ink blot beginning to dry at the edge of the signature line.

"They speak of fear," he thought. "But none of them has ever known it."

Their boots clicked past, the scent of pomade and cigars following in their wake. They left the door ajar behind them, as if even closing it was someone else's task.

"They laugh," Afanasy thought, "because they believe the world is made for their amusement. Even cowardice — if it belongs to another — becomes part of their entertainment."

He let the pen fall from his hand gently.

“Duels,” he thought. “Games in silk gloves played by boys who’ve never starved. They have pistols to display courage. I have silence.”

The sound of their voices drifted into the upper chamber, fainter now, dulled by distance. But still, that laughter lingered. Not because it was loud, but because it had been free — free of fear, of cost, of consequence.

And that was the insult.

The porcelain clinked faintly on the tray as Afanasy walked with careful steps, the tea rattling slightly with each motion of his hands. He had not been asked to serve it — no one ever asked. The task simply fell upon him, as all quiet humiliations did, without instruction or recognition. The samovar hissed in the corner, still steaming, forgotten now by those who had requested it.

He pushed open the door to the upper chamber with his elbow, head bowed, eyes fixed on the tray. The noblemen were gathered loosely around a long polished table, the same one where memoranda were never read and maps were only used to impress visiting officials. Their voices, still ripe with mirth, filled the room like perfume — sweet and unnecessary.

He placed the tray on the sideboard gently, his motions precise, each movement carved out of long practice: cup, saucer, spoon, repeat. His presence did not interrupt them. He could have been a coat rack, a shadow, a sudden gust from the window. No one turned.

One of them — the one with the high laugh and a sharp chin — leaned forward to pluck a sugar cube from the bowl, his ring flashing absurdly in the light.

“I swear to you,” he said, still laughing, “the man had a moustache like a brush, and a back hunched like a chimney sweep. Thirty, and already halfway to the grave!”

Another smirked, stirring his cup absently.

“That’s what they say, isn’t it? These little clerks — they burn out by thirty. All that ink and silence.”

“Thirty?” said the youngest, sipping with mock solemnity. “That’s generous. I’d say twenty-eight. They dry up like old books.”

Laughter.

Afanasy did not move.

He stood at the sideboard, his back to them, arranging the spoons as if the angles mattered, as if they were all that kept the room from collapsing into cruelty. He looked down into the steaming tea, watching his reflection ripple and vanish.

“They are speaking of me,” he thought. “And not just me — of all of us. As if we were candles burned too long, too cheaply. They don’t even hate us. They forget we’re alive.”

He imagined turning, interrupting them, announcing his age in a clear voice. Forty-four. But the thought passed. It would be like declaring one’s existence to a mirror — met with reflection, never recognition.

One of them, not even glancing, gestured vaguely in his direction.

“Tea’s hot,” he said. “That’s something.”

Afanasy stepped back toward the door, silent, forgotten.

“They sip what we carry,” he thought. “And laugh as if the cup filled itself.”

The door had almost closed behind him when one voice — louder now, because cruelty always grows bold at a safe distance — called out through the open sliver.

“Did you see him?” the man said. “He looks like a ghost already. Pale as old paper!”

And then came the laughter, again, too loud for the small chamber, laughter that felt rehearsed and yet always fresh when pointed downward. It bloomed with delight, echoing off the marble and mirrors and molding, a sound of men convinced of their charm.

Afanasy stood motionless in the corridor for a moment, tray still in his hands. The door clicked shut softly, sealing their joy inside and leaving him in the dim, cold hallway with only the distant ticking of a clock and the muted hum of clerks scratching pens against parchment.

He did not move for several seconds. The tray felt heavier now, the cups rattling slightly with the tremor in his fingers. Then he turned and walked slowly down the corridor, each step leaden. The burn in his face crept from his ears to his cheeks and into the soft place beneath his eyes. He kept his chin tucked low, as if the walls might mock him too if they caught sight of his shame.

“They laughed,” he thought. “At my skin, my walk, my silence. At what I am. Not something I said. Not something I did. Just… me.”

He reached his desk. The same worn chair, the same stack of yellowed pages, the same ink pot crusted at the edges. He set the tray down beside it too hard, one cup tipping dangerously before settling again.

His throat tightened.

Not enough to cry — no, that had been beaten out of him by years — but enough to silence breath, to trap something just behind the tongue. The kind of ache that made a man wish he could be invisible not just to the nobles, but to himself.

He sat and picked up his pen, though the page blurred slightly before him.

“They think I don’t hear,” he thought. “That I am deaf because I am quiet. That I am blind because I do not meet their eyes. But I hear every word. Every laugh. Every syllable like a pin pushed into the same wound.”

He dipped the pen into ink, but his hand hovered above the page, unmoving.

“They called me a ghost,” he thought, and the thought stayed there, fixed. “Not in metaphor. Not in passing. A ghost. Already.”

He clenched his jaw.

“Then let me haunt them,” he thought. “Let me be the thing they laugh at in daylight, and fear in the silence they can’t explain.”

But still, he did not write.

He sat hunched at his desk, eyes resting on the parchment before him though he had not read a word. His hand still held the pen, but it no longer moved. Ink darkened and dried at the tip, forgotten. The laughter from the upper chamber had long since faded into murmurs, then silence, but its echo remained in him, not as sound — but as weight.

“They laugh,” he whispered under his breath, barely audible. “They always laugh.”

The candle on his desk flickered low, casting shadows across the blotter, stretching the silhouette of his hand like the fingers of a dying tree.

“That’s all they have,” he thought. “Laughter. Laughter like a blade with no edge. Laughter like wallpaper — decorative, cheap, hiding the cracks beneath.”

He set the pen down, slowly, carefully, and sat back.

“They mock because they fear,” he said aloud now, the sound flat in the quiet room. “It’s not hatred. It’s not even contempt. It’s fear — of silence, of stillness, of the man who does not dance when the music plays.”

He rubbed his temples with ink-smudged fingers, breathing through his nose, eyes half-closed.

“They are hollow. Their joy is thin. That’s why they need to perform it — to rehearse it for each other. One of them laughs, and the others join, not because it is funny, but because it is required. It’s a ritual. A ward against the suspicion that life has no depth.”

He looked down at his hands, stained, worn, the knuckles raw from winter’s dry assault.

“I carry silence,” he thought. “And they hear it in me, even when I say nothing. That’s what unsettles them. That’s why they laugh.”

The ink on his blotter had dried completely. The page before him remained blank.

“I am the ghost they mock,” he thought, “because I remind them of what waits when the noise ends. They know that their youth will rot, that their coats will fade, that their names will disappear — and they will be me.”

He reached for the pen again, steadied his hand, and touched it to the paper.

“They fear me because I do not fear being unseen,” he thought. “And so I endure.”

He began to write.

The Woman with the Umbrella

The rain came hard and without grace, not the fine mist of sleet or the gentle drift of snow, but a cold, insistent downpour that battered the city like a punishment. Gutters spilled over, windows wept streaks of soot-stained water, and the stones underfoot shone black and treacherous. The sky was a flat lid of iron, unbroken, unmoved, as if the entire city had been pushed beneath a ceiling of grief.

Afanasy walked with no aim, coat soaked through, the fabric clinging to his shoulders like a second skin of sorrow. His boots squelched in the puddles, water seeping through the cracked soles. Each step was a weight, not a motion — a surrender to the road rather than a journey.

He kept his head low. There was nowhere to go, not really. No errands. No destination. Only the soft rhythm of rain on stone and the gray silence of his own breath.

That was when he saw her.

At the corner near the ruined bookstore, where the wind funneled through the alley like a living thing, a woman struggling with an umbrella. It was large and black, its ribs bent inward by the gusts, flapping like the wings of some startled bird. She gripped it with both hands, her hat askew, her coat pulled too tightly across her chest. One shoe slipped on the slick stone as she tried to wrestle the umbrella back into obedience.

Afanasy stopped.

She was not young, not old. Her hair was pinned, though poorly — strands clung to her face in wet curls. Her gloves were frayed at the fingertips. Not a noblewoman, not a beggar. Somewhere in between — like most. She wasn’t calling for help. She wasn’t crying. She was simply struggling.

He watched her.

She cursed softly as the umbrella turned inside out again, the metal spines snapping backward like broken fingers. She gave it a shake, but the wind caught it again, twisting it into a shape no longer recognizably useful.

She gave up then, lowering it, holding it at her side like a wounded instrument. Her face, flushed with frustration, now met the full onslaught of the rain. And she laughed — just once — a brief, bitter sound, more breath than voice, as if to say, *Of course. Of course the world wins again.*

Afanasy remained beneath the awning of a boarded-up shop, watching her without moving.

"She is not like them," he thought. "She struggles, and no one sees her. She is not protected by money, nor rescued by some passing gentleman with a spare umbrella and soft words. She endures. And she does not scream."

The umbrella hung at her side, dripping. Her posture straightened. She turned into the rain and walked on.

Afanasy took a step forward. Then another.

"She did not fall," he thought. "She folded her defeat, tucked it beneath her arm, and kept walking. Like me."

He followed, a few paces behind, the rain washing over both of them, silent witnesses to the same gray world.

He quickened his steps, though the weight of soaked wool pulled at his knees and shoulders. The rain had soaked everything now — hair, collar, the very lining of his coat — and still he moved toward her, unsure why. His feet splashed through a spreading gutter puddle as he caught up to her at the crossing where the curb had disappeared beneath a shallow stream.

"Miss," he said, voice low, almost uncertain it would leave his throat.

She stopped, startled, but didn't retreat. Her head turned slightly. Drops clung to her lashes.

He gestured awkwardly to the umbrella crumpled in her hand. "May I… carry it for you? Or —walk you somewhere?"

It wasn't gallantry. It wasn't even charity. It came out more like instinct — a kind of recognition, like seeing one's own reflection flinch and stepping forward to steady it.

For a breath, she said nothing.

Then, quietly, almost with surprise, she replied, "That's kind of you."

She didn't smile. But something in her eyes softened. Her lips were pale. Her coat was older than it looked at first glance. The lining showed at the hem, frayed, the threadwork of mending done by hand, not tailor. She held the umbrella out slightly, not handing it over, not resisting — just acknowledging the gesture.

Afanasy took it gently. The wind had folded the frame nearly in half; he didn't try to fix it, only carried it, like a shared burden that had already failed its purpose.

She walked beside him now, wordlessly. The street had emptied. Only the rain remained — steady, cleansing nothing, answering no prayers.

He glanced down and saw her hands — no gloves now — red with cold, cracked along the knuckles, the same raw texture as his own. Not the hands of a lady. Not manicured or hidden. Hands that scrubbed, that lifted buckets, that sewed by candlelight, that bore the silent marks of labor without recognition.

“She is like me,” he thought, “though she walks straighter.”

They moved together, no umbrella between them, no shield. Just two soaked figures pressing forward through a street that had already forgotten them.

She looked over once and said, barely above the rain, “Thank you.”

He gave a single nod.

Her voice had no performance in it. No coquetry. Just gratitude, plain and weather-worn. The kind of thanks that did not assume it would be remembered.

He didn’t ask her name. He didn’t offer his.

For a moment, they simply walked. And that was enough.

They turned down a narrower street where the rain slithered down the walls in long ribbons, gathering in puddles that mirrored broken windows and crooked gutters. Their footsteps echoed softer here, absorbed by the worn stones and sodden air. Neither of them spoke for a while. The silence between them wasn’t awkward — it was mutual, like two workers ending a long shift in the same direction without needing to speak of what had passed.

Then, softly, she said, “I work at a laundry, just off Ligovsky. The one with the blue shutters — if they haven’t rotted by now.”

He nodded, glancing toward her, though he didn’t meet her eyes.

“It’s long hours,” she added. “But the hands get used to the steam after a while.”

He wanted to say something. Not out of politeness — he had none of that rehearsed tone in him — but something honest, something simple. Yet no words came.

She didn’t seem to expect any.

They kept walking.

Afanasy’s thoughts wandered, unbidden but persistent.

“She is not noble,” he thought. “She is not scented. Not powdered. Not clean in the way the upper floors are clean — empty-clean. She smells of soap that doesn’t quite scrub out the sweat. Of fabric pressed too long under boiling irons. She walks like someone who doesn’t know anyone’s watching.”

He looked ahead, to the end of the street where the rain turned to mist, blending with chimney smoke. Their shadows stretched beside each other in the weak glow of a flickering gas lamp, more honest than portraits.

“She is real.”

The thought struck him like warmth in a drafty room. Not beautiful in the way paintings lie — but real in the way bread is real. In the way his own hands were. Cracked, capable, not designed for admiration but for use.

He imagined a room — small, like his own, but cleaner, with steam in the corners from a kettle, and a blanket folded neatly on a chair. He imagined her across from him in silence, not needing conversation to fill the air. Perhaps she would hum while she mended something. Perhaps he would write, not because it mattered, but because it calmed him. The two of them — sitting without spectacle, without audience, simply enduring the evening side by side.

“She would not laugh at me,” he thought. “She would not vanish.”

He looked over at her again, and though she didn’t turn to meet his gaze, there was something in her posture — unbent, unhurried — that made his chest feel suddenly full.

Just for a moment, the world felt less cruel.

At the next corner, where the gaslight flickered with a nervous orange glow and the buildings leaned close together like tired old men whispering secrets, she slowed her steps. The rain had softened now into mist, wrapping the street in gauze, blurring edges, softening outlines into quiet silhouettes. Her shoes splashed once in a shallow pool. Then she paused.

“This is me,” she said, simply.

Afanasy stopped beside her. He looked down the alley she nodded toward — narrow, quiet, a crooked line of laundry still hanging limp between two windowless walls. There was no sign. No number. Just a single cracked lantern hanging from a rusted bracket and a dark stairwell beyond it that vanished into shadow.

She turned slightly, shifting the broken umbrella still hanging at her side.

He opened his mouth, just a little.

She waited, but only for a second. Then, with a small nod — one of recognition, not farewell — she stepped away from him and walked into the mist.

He did not ask her name.

Her figure grew hazy almost immediately, the damp air swallowing her into the fabric of the alley like a memory fading even as it forms. Soon, there was nothing — no footsteps, no door closing, only mist and the soft sound of rain dripping from broken eaves.

He stood there a moment longer, motionless.

“She is gone,” he thought. “And I do not know who she was.”

But he felt no urgency. No regret. Instead, something slower, gentler bloomed in his chest — an ache without bitterness.

“She belongs to the world that almost was,” he thought. “A name would make her finite. A name would fix her in place. But this… this stays open. She becomes what I need.”

He turned slowly and walked back the way they had come, his coat heavier, his heart quieter.

“I will keep her as ache,” he thought. “Not as memory, not as story — but as ache. It’s purer. I will remember her without the danger of truth.”

And the mist closed in behind him, sealing the space where two strangers had briefly walked together in the rain.

Philosophy

By morning, the city had dried unevenly, as if the rain had never committed fully to washing anything clean. The windows of Afanasy’s building were filmed with dirt, the street below already scarred by cartwheels and boot heels. Inside his room, the air was still damp, but warm enough now for the ink not to freeze.

He sat at his desk, hunched forward, a chipped teacup cold at his side, a pencil worn to the nub between his fingers. The candle beside him leaned low in its holder, its light dimming as the flame flickered uncertainly over the worn pages spread before him.

They were not letters. Not copies. Not anything asked of him. They were his own.

Scraps, mostly — odd shapes torn from the margins of official forms, pages stolen from unused ledgers, the backs of old memoranda with dates long expired. They lay scattered across the desk and floor like brittle leaves, and one by one, he covered them with words.

Not prose. Not poetry. Thoughts. Observations. Quiet denouncements. He wrote not to be read, but to remove the words from his chest, where they throbbed like a fever.

“The city does not run on industry,” he scrawled, *“but on illusion. The illusion of order. The illusion of dignity. The illusion that we are seen.”*

Another scrap: *“Men laugh to avoid silence, and build systems to justify cruelty. They place chandeliers in offices and call it civilization.”*

He paused, rubbing his temple with ink-smeared fingers, then wrote again.

“To suffer without witness is not tragedy. It is truth.”

The stack beside him grew. He glanced toward the bed, where the others were hidden — pushed deep beneath the mattress, layered flat, wrapped in cloth to keep out moisture. Dozens of them now, perhaps more. He did not count. He didn't need to.

He folded the newest page and slid it carefully into a cloth sleeve, then knelt, lifted the edge of the bed, and tucked it away.

"They must never be found," he thought. "Not because they are dangerous, but because they are weak. The moment they are read, they will be misunderstood. Mocked. Laughed at like everything else."

He sat again, hands on his knees, breath steady.

"I am a clerk by title," he thought, "but by spirit, I am a chronicler of the lie. A collector of hidden truths. A witness without audience."

Outside, someone slammed a door. A baby cried. The hallway smelled of kerosene.

Inside, Afanasy leaned back in his chair, already reaching for another scrap.

He unfolded one of the older scraps from beneath the stack — a square torn from the margin of a Ministry memo, its original type faint and useless beneath the curling script he had laid over it weeks ago. The ink had faded slightly, but the words remained clear. He held it in both hands and read it aloud, softly, almost reverently, as if speaking to an unseen audience assembled somewhere behind the walls.

"*Dignity is not granted by position. It is stolen back, quietly, in the hours when no one is looking.*"

He paused, the words hanging in the stale air of the room like incense. A flicker of something passed through him — not pride, not exactly, but something adjacent to it. A brief shimmer of conviction.

He picked up another.

"*The man who endures without reward is closer to truth than the man who triumphs without reflection.*"

He read that line more slowly, savoring the rhythm, the weight of it. A tremble stirred at the edge of his mouth — not quite a smile, but its shadow.

"I've said something no one else dares say," he thought. "I've touched something none of them can feel."

He looked around his room as if expecting to see someone nodding in agreement — an invisible witness leaning in, lips parted, stunned by his clarity. But there was only the ticking of the wall clock, the creak of settling boards, and the faint rustle of the city's indifference pressing at the windowpanes.

“No one will read these,” he thought. “They will be buried with me, or burned without question. They will be mistaken for scribbles, nonsense, the detritus of a lonely clerk.”

Yet still, he held the page in his hand like a sacred object.

“I have seen what they refuse to see,” he said aloud now, voice firmer. “The lie of appearance. The sickness beneath comfort. The cowardice dressed in laughter.”

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk, the scrap still in hand.

“If the world were just,” he whispered, “they would quote me in salons. Print my words in journals. Debates would turn on what I’ve written. But the world is not just. The world rewards noise, not depth.”

And yet, for a moment, he felt it — that brief, warming illusion that his thoughts meant something. That somewhere beyond the walls, beyond the frozen roofs and chimneys, there might be someone who would one day find these papers and understand.

He folded the scrap again, delicately, and returned it to its hiding place.

“I am not forgotten,” he thought. “I am undiscovered.”

And with that, he reached for a new blank corner and dipped his pen again into the ink.

The streets crackled with frost beneath the thawed layer of slush, the sky above the market hanging low and gray, like a ceiling too tired to lift. Afanasy walked with his collar high, hands buried deep in his coat, the wind cutting through the seams all the same. He had no need for food, not really. He came here for the watching — the slow, endless theater of the everyday, where no one knew they were performing.

The stalls were the same as always: wooden carts with sagging wheels, crates stacked with soft potatoes, jars of pickled cabbage, baskets of gray bread, fish laid out like bloated corpses on melting beds of ice. Voices competed over prices that never truly changed. Hands reached, haggled, waved. Children clung to skirts. Boots stamped for warmth.

Afanasy moved among them like a man underwater, drifting, untouched. He did not make eye contact. He did not smile. He let the noise wash over him.

“They are so small,” he thought. “Their world, so narrow.”

He watched a woman argue over the price of an onion, her scarf slipping from her head as she gestured with veined hands.

“She will go home today believing herself victorious,” he thought, “as though a copper saved is meaning.”

Two boys laughed behind a bread stall, stuffing their mouths with something stolen while pretending to help stack loaves.

“They laugh now,” he muttered inwardly. “But their laughter is thin. A placeholder until labor breaks them. They will be fishmongers or drunks before they grow facial hair.”

He passed a man hawking cheap brass buttons, shouting with the same voice as a preacher but to no congregation. His teeth were brown, his coat missing a sleeve.

“Pride without content,” Afanasy thought. “Sound where there should be silence. He believes that volume replaces value.”

He stopped before a stall selling old books, their pages warped, their spines bent with damp. The merchant smoked and didn’t look up.

“These books, once touched by men who dreamed,” he thought. “Now sold by the weight.”

A child bumped into him, mumbled a sorry, and darted off. Afanasy didn’t reply.

“They scurry like rats,” he thought. “All of them chasing crumbs. No thought, no reflection. Just the grind of habit dressed up as life.”

He turned from the market slowly, deliberately, the smell of salted fish and coal smoke lingering in his coat.

“I observe them,” he thought. “That is my labor. Not to sell, not to speak — but to see. I am their witness. Their reluctant scribe.”

And as he walked back toward the cold mouth of his building, the day already beginning to dim, he carried their faces with him not out of empathy, but as proof of what he was not.

As he reached the narrow entrance of his building, the familiar staleness returned — damp wood, kerosene, and the faint reek of boiled barley from somewhere deep within. The corridor was dim, lit only by a flickering bulb that buzzed overhead like an insect too stubborn to die. Afanasy stepped through the vestibule, his shoulders hunched against the residual chill of the outside, when a door creaked open just ahead.

Nadia emerged, sleeves rolled to her elbows, a tin pail swinging at her side. Her face was flushed from scrubbing, loose strands of hair sticking to her temples. The kerchief she wore had slipped slightly askew, exposing the roots of hair gone prematurely gray. She squinted at him in the light, then let out a breath through her nose — not quite a laugh.

“Still writing sermons to the floorboards, Afanasy?” she said, wiping her palms on her apron.

He paused, caught mid-step. His jaw clenched automatically, and for a moment, he considered saying nothing at all. But her gaze lingered on him — not cruel exactly, but probing, the way one tests a pot for cracks.

“I write what no one else will,” he said quietly, his voice low, nearly swallowed by the corridor.

“Mm-hmm.” She moved past him, the pail brushing against the edge of the wall. “That’s what you said last year too. When the inspector found ink on the coal shovel.”

He said nothing.

She paused a step down, then turned back slightly. Her eyes, still sharp despite the tiredness beneath them, studied him. “Words don’t scrub the floors, Afanasy. They don’t pay the tea seller, and they don’t fix boots.”

He looked at her then — really looked. Her hands were raw and red, wrists thin and corded with work. Her eyes weren’t mocking, not fully. Just tired. Deeply, quietly tired of everything that didn’t make the world cleaner, warmer, or more full.

“I write because I see what others refuse to,” he said, not raising his voice.

Nadia gave a short shrug. “We all see. Some of us just don’t have time to write it down.”

She started down the stairs again. “Be careful the floorboards don’t talk back.”

The echo of her boots faded, each step muffled by the pail swinging gently at her side.

Afanasy stood still in the corridor, the silence returning like a weight placed gently but firmly across his shoulders.

“Sermons to the floorboards,” he thought. “She thinks that’s what it is. Mad scribbles. Ink spilled by a man with no one left to hear.”

And perhaps it was. But still, he knew this — he would write again tonight. Not because it mattered, but because it was the only thing that did.

That night, after the building had quieted and the corridors had emptied of footsteps and quarrels, Afanasy lay beneath the thin blanket on his cot, staring at the ceiling. The boards creaked faintly above, and somewhere in the courtyard, a cat wailed once before falling silent. His ink-stained fingers rested on his chest, his breath shallow. The final candle had long since guttered out, and the cold in the room had crept under the blanket, coiling around his legs.

And yet, in sleep, the cold vanished.

He stood — no longer in his narrow, sagging cot, but upright, tall, in a vast and golden hall. Marble gleamed beneath his feet. Crystal chandeliers floated above like constellations, lit without flame. The air was warm, perfumed faintly with cedar and some elusive sweetness. There was silence — but not emptiness. It was the silence of reverence.

All around him, nobles stood in rows — men in medals, women in velvet and pearls — each of them with their eyes downcast, heads bowed, hands folded before them like schoolchildren. At the center, he stood clothed not in rags, but in black robes lined with deep crimson, the kind worn by judges or prophets in old woodcuts. A shaft of light — pure and high — fell upon him alone.

He lifted his hand, and though he spoke no word, the crowd bent lower.

“They have seen me,” he thought. “They know now. I am the one who told the truth while they played at comfort. I was silent, but they finally heard.”

A page approached — young, trembling — holding a scroll. Afanasy took it, opened it, and read his own words aloud, his voice deep, resonant, unquestioned. No one interrupted. No one laughed.

But just as he reached the last line, a sharp sound rose — harsh, wet, close. A cough.

Then again.

He jolted awake in darkness, doubled forward on the cot, hacking into the thin air, a hot, raw edge scraping his throat. The room stank of mildew, cold sweat, and the sourness of unwashed skin. His blanket had slipped off; his shirt clung damply to his chest. His body trembled, not from dream, but from chill.

He leaned over the edge of the bed, gasping, spitting into the rag he kept beside the basin. For a moment, the taste of blood sat on his tongue, bitter, metallic.

His hand went to his forehead — slick with sweat. His hair stuck to his scalp. The floor groaned as he shifted his weight to sit upright.

The vision of the hall remained only faintly — the glow of chandeliers, the hush of awe — already crumbling under the pressure of coughing and the creak of a rat behind the wall.

He looked down at his hands, still shaking.

“They will never bow,” he thought. “They will never kneel. They will never even notice.”

And as he lay back down, too tired to rise, he pulled the damp blanket over his chest and whispered into the dark:

“But I did stand.”

Then silence.

The Quiet Room

The first sign was the thirst. A dryness not of the mouth, but of the bones — as if something inside Afanasy had been quietly drained and replaced with dust. He lay curled beneath the threadbare blanket, the room around him still and sunless, a pale half-light slipping through the soot-streaked window. His skin felt tight, stretched too thin over his frame, and when he turned his head, the world tilted unnaturally, slow and thick, like ink spreading through water.

He had not eaten in two days. Or was it three?

Time had collapsed. The rhythm of the building — footsteps in the hall, the groan of plumbing, the distant clatter of pots — passed without him. He no longer rose to write. The pages under his bed remained untouched, the ink on his desk dried in its pot. The pen lay where he had last dropped it, brittle as a dead twig.

Cholera, perhaps. Or something like it. He had seen others taken this way — a sweating, trembling silence, a thinning of the voice.

No one knocked.

He realized this one morning — or what he assumed was morning — when the light changed and he stirred with effort. The door was closed, and had stayed closed. No one came to collect him for copying. No one shouted his name down the corridor. Nadia did not bang the wall with her broom. Even the inspector had not cursed him for missing a day.

“I am no longer part of the schedule,” he thought faintly. “They’ve forgotten already.”

He turned his face to the wall, cold sweat clinging to his neck. The paint was cracked there, a yellow vein branching through the plaster. He watched it for hours, or minutes — he could no longer tell — and imagined it was a map. A route to somewhere quieter.

His tongue was thick, lips split at the corners. He tried to speak once — only a word, not for help, just to hear his own voice.

Nothing came out.

“There is no audience,” he thought. “No witness. No door creaks. No footsteps.”

He closed his eyes, breath shallow.

“I am vanishing,” he thought. “And the world does not need to be told.”

And the silence answered with nothing, as it always had.

That night, or what might have been night — in that dim gray stretch where time had no markers and his body lay unmoving beneath the blanket soaked with sweat — Afanasy drifted down into a dream not like the others. It did not come with fire or grandeur, nor with judgment. It came quietly, like a hand placed gently on his shoulder.

Elena stood before him, just as she had in the bakery line all those years ago, her coat speckled with flour, her eyes filled with that simple warmth that once unsettled him so deeply. But this time, he did not look away. She smiled, and he did not doubt it.

“I waited,” she said, softly, and he didn’t ask for how long. He simply stepped closer, and the space between them filled with something warm, not named, not explained — just there.

The dream shifted.

He stood in the Ministry again, but it was not the cracked, groaning building of reality. It was polished and glowing with morning light. The young nobles — Gromov’s lot, the laughing

men, the ones with gloves more expensive than his life — were seated at long tables, papers before them. They looked up when he entered.

They rose.

One of them — the one with the monocle — clapped slowly. Not mocking. Not sarcastic. Respectful.

“You wrote what we could not,” he said. “You saw what we refused to.”

Afanasy walked past them, his boots no longer scuffed, his coat no longer threadbare. A strange warmth filled his chest — not pride, not glory — but ease. The ease of finally being seen and not needing to defend it.

Then, the umbrella.

The woman stood under it again, though it was whole now, unbroken. She held it open for both of them, the rain around them falling without urgency. He took a place beside her, and she turned to him with no questions in her eyes, as if they had walked together all their lives.

She reached out — not to fix him, not to claim him — but to hold his hand. Her fingers were cracked, red, familiar. Real.

“You were never invisible,” she said.

He didn’t reply.

He only stood there, in the dream, between them all — Elena, the nobles, the woman with the umbrella — and in that moment he felt something he could only describe as welcome.

Not celebration. Not triumph.

Welcome.

He was not mocked. He was not dismissed. He was not alone.

And in that place beyond sound, beyond walls, beyond ink and sweat and cold, he rested in the warmth of being accepted, if only for the length of a dream.

At some hour before dawn, or perhaps after it, when the room was hushed and shrouded in pale haze, Afanasy stirred. The fever had loosened its grip slightly — not in mercy, but in exhaustion. His limbs were weak and trembling, soaked in cold sweat that clung to his skin like gauze. The blanket had slipped from him. He lay twisted against the mattress, breath shallow, dry lips parted in a slow, rasping rhythm.

For a long time he didn’t move. Then, with a low grunt, he turned onto his side, the effort making sparks dance in his vision. His fingers found the edge of the table, then the cracked wall. Slowly, painfully, he pulled himself forward, inch by inch. The wooden floor beneath him felt like ice.

The window.

It loomed above him, small and clouded with grime, its ledge covered in dust and the curled wings of dead flies. He crawled to it — like a thing half-dead, not pleading for life, but drawn toward light without knowing why. When he reached the base, he pressed his forehead against the cold pane and breathed a mist onto the glass.

The city was there, beyond the film of dust and frost. Dim shapes moved below — hunched figures crossing streets, carts trundling through puddles, a cluster of children chasing each other between lamp posts. Somewhere, a woman carried a bundle of firewood. Somewhere, a man emptied slop into a gutter. It was all the same, as it always had been.

Afanasy blinked, eyes heavy, cheek resting against the wood of the frame.

“They walk,” he whispered, his voice hoarse, barely audible even to himself. “Still they walk… as if anything matters.”

He let the words sit in the space before him, absorbed into the fogged window, the sky above dull and unchanging.

“They buy, and sell, and squabble,” he whispered again. “As if the world is not rotting beneath their boots.”

He watched two men cross paths and not greet one another. A woman adjusted her shawl, turned her face from the wind. Life, small and constant, continued without remark.

He kept his eyes open. Watching them move. As if the act of seeing it, just once more, could give shape to the thing he had tried to name in ink — the absurd, stubborn persistence of people who believed in the weight of their own routines.

He let his eyes close then, not in peace, but in quiet. The pane remained cold against his skin.

And below, the city walked on.

The room was dim, the candle stub having burned to a shallow wax puddle on the dish. Shadows stretched from the corners like tired limbs. Afanasy sat hunched at the edge of his cot, wrapped in his coat now, though it no longer gave warmth — only shape, a last outline of a man trying not to dissolve entirely.

His hands trembled as he reached for the small cloth-wrapped bundle beneath the bed, fingers fumbling until they caught it. Inside, pressed between rags and string, were the pages. His notes. His sermons to no congregation. His declarations scratched in solitude. He took one — the final scrap he had left unmarked — and laid it gently across the blotter.

The pencil, dull and chewed at the end, still rested beside the inkpot, long since dry.

He picked it up.

The line came not as invention but as inevitability. No clever turn. No rhetorical weight. Just the truth as it stood now, stripped of hope and disguise.

Even silence mocks.

He stared at the words, the graphite smudged slightly by the shake in his hand.

"Yes," he thought. "That is it."

He slid the paper aside without folding it, letting it rest atop the others like the last page in a hollow book. Then, with a grunt of effort, he leaned forward, reached into the wooden cupboard beside his desk, and pulled out the small glass bottle. Its label had long peeled off, but the smell — sharp, raw — struck the air as soon as the cork was pulled free.

Vodka. Harsh. Cheap. Sufficient.

He took a deep pull, the liquid biting down his throat like fire. He coughed immediately, body seizing as the fumes pushed out through his nose and mouth, the taste of spirits thick, oily, clinging to his tongue.

The stench of it filled the room.

He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve, breath ragged, eyes watering. But it was not from the drink alone. There was something deeper — a tremble not of weakness, but release.

He looked at the empty air before him and said nothing.

Nothing replied.

The air had grown sharp again by the time anyone noticed. The corridor outside Afanasy's door had gone quiet; no one had seen him at the samovar, no one had heard his cough. Nadia, who sometimes scolded him, had stopped checking altogether. A sour odor began to gather faintly by the stairwell, at first mistaken for spoiled cabbage or stagnant water. By the third day, it was undeniable.

The landlord came with a ring of keys, his expression one of mild irritation rather than concern. "He's probably drunk or run off," he muttered, testing the lock. When the door swung open, a gust of stale air met him — cold, heavy, unmoving. The candle had long since guttered out. The only sound was the dull flap of the curtain where the window draft crept through.

Afanasy lay on the floor beside his desk, one arm bent awkwardly beneath him, the other stretched toward the wall as though he'd tried to rise and simply stopped. The bottle stood on its side, empty, a thin line of dried vodka marking the grain of the wood. His face was calm, the skin pale as chalk, eyes half-open as if still considering something that had not been finished.

The landlord stood for a moment, sniffed, grimaced. He looked around the room — the papers on the table, the single cot, the cracked basin. He didn't touch anything. He left to

fetch help, though not quickly. There were forms to fill out, and such things always took time.

When they came later to carry the body down, one of the men noticed the stack of papers beside the cold hand. A few had scattered to the floor, gray with dust. The top page was still visible, the writing faint but legible.

Even silence mocks.

He glanced at it, frowned, then shrugged. “Another crazy clerk,” he said, sliding the paper back with his boot. The others didn’t look.

No family was listed. No records were found beyond his name on the rent ledger. There was no eulogy. No priest. No flowers. Just the dull scrape of boots on the stairs as they carried him out, wrapped in an old blanket, the bottle and the pages left behind.

The door was shut again. By evening, another tenant was already asking about the room.

The window remained open that night, and the wind from the canal turned the top page over once, then twice, before it settled — unread, waiting in the quiet that had always been his only witness.